



HOLOHAUS-4



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SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher McDonnell for the things we tell

to nekosattva for commerce appendages

to rumour hell for the songs exhumed

to Amara Reyes for flights

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who sees this



NEW ANIMALS

NEW ANIMALS

by: Escher McDonell



Subject: Re: what are we calling these things?

I've seen everything from Antifaunal Assault Armour to slaughter suits to Manticore Tactical Equalization Gear to the Epiphany Apparel d6a1ee4e1621f244246d1912b5926b39. I got that last one from an audio recording. The interviewee recited the entire fucking hash from memory. As far as I can tell, the suit doesn't have an official name. I visited a factory where every department had its own designation and wasn't aware that the name wasn't shared by any other team.

If we believe the rumours (and keep in mind the rumours are extremely consistent and founded in firsthand accounts), the sche-

character profile



matics and a prototype for AC's armour were found in an off-campus McGill basement closet, along with detailed guides for synthesizing the suit's trademark plastic-adiposal mesentery — which does, indeed, require bone marrow cells. Which leads to my next discovery, which will probably land this gibmail a Jupiter rating.

Yes, the first suit's material solely incorporated human bone marrow. And the suit was still “alive,” despite the years that had passed between its manufacture and discovery. I say “alive”, but the Material Fabrication Control word for the mesentery's alive-like state is “sub-cellular autonomic trembling” to make the distinction between what the material does and what living tissues do. Apparently there's a significant difference, though having read the documentation it seems like one of those hairs scientists arbitrarily split to simplify their jobs.

The closet where the suit was found didn't exist on any official blueprints. No scientist put their name on the schematics. If it hadn't been for a remodeling effort the prototype would have probably stayed buried. Radiocarbon dating established that the armour could have been assembled as early as the 1960s. Whoever built and programmed the micro-computer and its OS could've made a killing on computer miniaturization but clearly thought a mask on an obscure piece of experimental Cold War hazardous environment gear was more important. It uses highly, highly shrunk-down vacuum tubing. Think Soviet

world logs



MiG avionics. Works across a breadth of temperatures and resists electromagnetic pulses. This is why the prototype made it through Sunny Sunday completely functional.

Though there was some discussion around using the prototype's technology to break the gibber monopoly, the people who first discovered that suit in a Ravenscrag basement mainly saw it as a historical curiosity. For whatever reason the prototype tumbled into JCO hands. Three years later it was standard issue for Animal Controllers across the country. I still haven't been able to shut the info-gap on that one. Nobody signed off on the decision as far as I can tell.

The AC suit we see today is hardly modified from that prototype. It's been updated with some basic network connectivity features, better batteries, solid-state electronics to supplement (but only supplement) the vacuum-tube systems, better optics, etc. Otherwise what we have now copies the prototype down to the riveting. As far as I've been able to gather the suits aren't made with human bone marrow anymore, but what's there now is such a cocktail (and it *is* derived from previous plastic-adiposal batches) that I find it hard to rule out a few human cells in the mix. But, for all intents and purposes, it's the same damned suit — with one blinding exception.

Those skull masks weren't part of the prototype. The original mask was a neutral gasmask looking thing. Like what you'd ex-



pect if you thought your soldiers would be wading through a radioactive wasteland, and maybe needed special lenses to see radiation and electromagnetic waves or whatever.

I've spent a few hundred hours working on this and I still don't know where the skull thing comes from. Again, no documentation. Speculation of course abounds in both unofficial and official channels. The fact of the latter really scares me. Why don't JCO people know the reason for the skulls if it's the singular aesthetic change made to the suit? I cannot articulate how grotesquely overcomplicated the process for manufacturing those masks is.

The most popular theory is that something about it combined with the suit's material throws animals off-guard. Are they facing something living or dead? Animate or inanimate? Part of the cycles of birth and death, or immortal bio-petrochemical?

Frankly I highly doubt animals make these distinctions. They probably just care if something moves or it doesn't, but I'm not an animal behaviourist. Just a human one. The usual erasure trails and intratextual whale prints that point to deletions *simply are not there*. While I've done enough research at this point to make some very, *very* educated guesses, as with so many things, all I can really do is guess.

When did it become the case that Information Controllers were



stuck guessing about their own government? *We* handle *their* information. It makes me wonder what the hell *else* is buried somewhere out there undiscovered in some out there secret basements.

Which suggests (I hate to say it) that this was kept in a silo *from us*.

Which could have only been done by someone higher than us in the JCO.

Which means we might be confronting both the underground press and an internal parallel information infrastructure.

This is bad.

I keep telling myself that we aren't America. We aren't going to end like America did. But then it occurs to me that we might have built something worse. Not fragile because it is fractious, but sturdy, doing exactly what it was designed to do, without our input.

I'll save my remaining heresies for brunch. (Still on for Sunday?) I'm putting the finishing touches on my report, and I'll have it handed in tomorrow, in addition to my recommendations for how we should proceed given current behavioural projections.

Here's a teaser: They aren't professionals. They fight every night,



but they don't fight people.

We do.

world logs



NEW ANIMALS

Synopsis

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

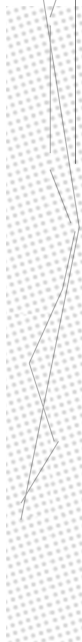
creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.





Last Time

between restricted reports of the new animals, essin and lacie learn their true complexity from an individual thought missing





CW: forcible recruitment, mind reading, brainwashing, dismemberment, war, colonialism, massacre of civilians, sexual assault (non-explicit), animal cruelty

Behind your face,

That's where the world is,

That's where everyone lives,

Where you shave your head, send the texts, channel the dead

Fight or flight,

I can't tell, can't tell, can't tell

Wrong from right

-Zach Hill, "Dark Art"

September struck: crisp pure north wind that curdled to humid heat by the week's end.

NEW
ANIMALS

EYE TEAR HOLES



New animals approached at a steady clip. Announcements infested the news and Essin recognized unannounced new species as they walked to work.

Amelia had not resurfaced. Essin dwelt for a span on fantasies where they awoke and she was there, she was fucking Lacie or fucking them or in the basement with a jar, something pulsing inside, whispering, “A new artichoke. It’s the same, you still eat the heart.”

Her absence lingered. She’d left no signs or marks in the underbrush to say which trail lead to tomorrow. News winnowed teeming events to banalities. Triumphs and regularities flanked crisis as new animal reports joined the weather forecast. Codenames from medieval bestiaries dried up and Animal Control strip-mined mythologies for new names. Manticore’s sting clogged the digestive tract with bezoars. Gorgon’s hideous song turned trees into dust. Anansi’s aggressive weaving extinguished Sudbury: the creature could weave brick, and metal, and meat with equal ease, any substance turning to threads in its seven thousand hands.

Lacie had given up prying after underground literature. Essin guessed she was preoccupied and crushed by the outer world’s murderous progress. Perhaps, they thought,



something about illicit academia was inherently linked to Amelia.

But Essin, for all their doubts, hadn't surrendered.

They knew their faith had been rewarded when one morning their eyes caught piled bread tags near a ditch pipe. They stooped to see the plastic pastel chips and glanced up to see pamphlets on the pipe's bottom, held to its roof with a fat magnet, a lozenge used to remove metal from cow-guts like the one Amelia had used to wipe her computers. Gingerly they tugged one pamphlet out and made sure the others were steadily in place. It was bright green and its front was blackened by a photocopy-blurred image. A few legible letters showed green, DOG'S MINISTRY CALLS TO YOU!

They opened it, glanced quickly at the contents.

DOG'S SON DIED FOR YOU!

And this is why the grootslang has transcended symbiosis and arrived at pure syzygy.

Information Control has rigorously censored all images of the grootslang. I'm gonna come clean with you, if you asked me to



describe what these mothers looked like, I'd tell you I have no idea. Usually you can trace a new animal back to its original by its dominant features: what skin it has or its ears or its habitat or habits. No new animal is entirely new (though they're entirely animal). Well, what our informants have gathered seems to indicate that the grootslang is an animal too dense in particulars to be tidily identified. Too much is going on.

Sound like a hybrid? I've thought we're due for new hybrids of one kind or another. Some freak symbiosis. Maybe I'll get to cross that one off the list.

Anyway, what we do know is they're fucking huge, very strong, and— most vital, for our purposes— they come from under—

Sky a unanimous white, shaded blue where the climbing sun hadn't reached its overlook. Essin folded the pamphlet and slipped it in their pocket, half-ran to work, each footfall in their shitty work shoes a jolt in their hips, too excited to register the shuddering ground. Perhaps it was a momentary weakness in their legs. They worked on their feet, after all.

Their manager, Honey, sat on the curb, gun in her lap like always, smoking and gazing tired-eyed at a controller co-ven in the parking lot. It wasn't anomalous for control-





lers to linger after dawn but they'd brought a dozen trucks they'd parked crisscross without any regard for the yellow lines. Their sides were dusty, like a hard-to-reach window pane in a train terminal, and emblazoned with the JCO's maple leaf logo and Engineering Control.

"What's going on?" said Essin.

"Cannon," Honey said. "You feel that earthquake earlier?" She hefted the shotgun over to Essin.

"Wait, a cannon?"

"Yeah, look," she pointed her chin and while with a cumbersome manoeuvre butted out her cigarette on her boot sole.

A fat phallic barrel sloped west over the houses, gesturing lewdly over the neighbourhood. Controllers wheeled munitions on dollies and cranked massive wrenches on the bolts binding the cannon to the tripod holding it to the asphalt, which was cracking under its weight. Essin thought even the engineers wear silver skulls clamped to their heads. They tried, without much strength, to fend off the feeling of nostalgia from the trucks: they parodied carnivals where Essin's mom had dumped them in the sum-



mer, that occupied strip mall parking lots with spinning rides and barbecues and cold sweets. A few regular controllers stood guard between withering parking lot trees, silver skulls the same colour as the sky, less friendly than the carnies who'd kept an eye on them until the sun started setting and Essin meandered back home.

By nine AM the parking lot was crammed. People were parking their cars on the gritty grey margins. Essin was assigned front cash and three people complained about the cannon. One old man with a gold cross nestled in the wire growing from his ruddy chest told them they should tell their manager about it, and that it was the kind of thinking that could land them a promotion one day.

Honey popped in over the headset, "Tell him if he came here to jerk off he should do it in the bathroom."

"I'll pass that along," Essin said, both to Honey and the customer.

But the cannon was fine, a silent inconvenience, until it fired at noon: a blast tossing leaves and dust and parking lot litter. Its shot shrilled over rooftops. Windows shook. Cracked. Birds took flight as a collective flinch rippled at the speed of sound across the neighbourhood. Moments



later (Essin measuring the miles it travelled, like thunder, by Mississippi) a second boom answered. Faraway a plume mushroomed over the rooftops. A smokey pillar tilted with the wind from the cannon's mouth. AC artillery cranked wheels to adjust the trajectory. Customers watched out the window at the ordnance witches at their work, gritting their teeth until a second shot muted all other sound.

Essin had risen late from a night spent dreaming they were lost in a shifting labyrinth, a museum made of lichen, and hadn't had time to pack lunch. Nerves battered by the cannon shots and craving grease and salt they popped into Five Guys for lunch. They'd been holding it in for the last half hour, so after ordering from the tired teens in their visors they went to the bathroom, hardly thinking, afloat in busyness.

It was a cramped corner bathroom with a urinal and a narrow toilet stall. A man slipped in behind them and sidled up to the urinal, where he freed a grey spit pearl as he jangled his belt. Blonde highlights fringed a backwards baseball cap, contrasting the deep tan on his oddly hairless body—hairless save for the red goatee, brushed and styled, that decorated his chin. He looked in that bland



space like he was alien to places without sunlight. His arms bulged from inside a clean white A-shirt. A fat gold chain (Cuban links) gleamed around his neck. With his free hand, he rubbed the red goatee as he tried to pee. Tried. He winced and grunted as piss plopped out of him. He sniffed and sighed wetly, as though he was both hung-over and wrestling with a cold.

Essin slipped into a stall and finished pissing quickly. Went for the sink. Barely wet their hands and ran them under the blast-dryer before turning to the door.

He grumbled, "You put any soap on that?"

They didn't answer.

"At least pump some hand sanitizer on that shit before you go touching surfaces."

They pumped some alcohol gel into their palms, rubbed them quickly together.

"Be sure you get under your nails. For God's sake, you work at Starbucks. Fuck knows what kind of fucking anthrax is throwing an orgy under your nails. You should trim those, by the way."





Surely he had to be done pissing by now but no, his urine still trickled into the urinal in fits and plops.

"I have a condition," he said.

Essin glanced around. They hadn't spoken what they thought and he hadn't turned around to see their expression.

"Are we done?" they said, "Can I go now?"

"I dunno, can you?" he snorted, exhaled, more piss dropped unsteadily onto the urinal puck, "I'm not going to stop you, but, I mean, do you know what I know?"

The one eye they caught as he looked over his shoulder to meet their gaze drooped and was pink almost to the iris.

"I'm stoned. So what? Who works sober?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you know what I know? Like, you know how things are these days, they aren't exactly safe," he zipped up his pants, smacked the urinal handle with his forearm. "So it's important to determine what strangers know if they're acting suspicious. You've never met me. I pee weird. I'm



2.
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NBBV
COMMOD
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2W
D12
V1D1N4
WVWV
D1G1V
E1
TVCN2
W1N1
W1C1D1D1
1E1B1V
E1D1W1D
2E1D1
W1E1G11
V1B1B1C1
1N1
COM2EC1E
W1E1
211
D1G1V
1B2W
TVCN2

talking to you like I can read your mind. Maybe I can. Do you know? You don't know shit about me and you're about to walk away. Pathetic."

Both blue bloodshot eyes faced them now. He tightened his belt. They stepped back as he leaned to the sink. He washed his hands with soap, watching himself in the mirror. Essin's hand drifted to their pocket, their wallet.

"I don't want your money."

"I "

He gestured to his chain.

"Use your fucking head. Does it look like I need money?"

That line something quavered in their frame. Illegal in the marrow.

Essin used their fucking head.

"Oh," they said.

He was a knowledge auditor.

"A lot of people know to do visual sweeps if you watch people's eyes you can tell when someone's sweeping. Basic





sweeps are common knowledge. People do it automatically these days. And I probably would have ignored you if that's all you'd done. But, you see, you did a blind-spot check, too, which means you know how to spot new corn snakes or new damselflies. And Information Control hasn't released anything on either of those yet. It's a Saturn-class Knowledge Hazard. If people knew there were things that could hide in plain sight they'd be pretty upset. And in the underground, nobody has published anything on those, either. The research isn't finished. This means you haven't just been reading, someone's been teaching you. That's unlawful learning and accessory to unlicensed education."

He was thorough with the suds. He cleaned his wrists where they wrinkled, massaging the creases with a thumb.

"You ever seen the science on how far piss particles travel? I'd wash my shirt if I could. Now, you have a choice to make," he said, "At the moment I have a vague idea of what exactly it is that you know, so typical protocol is a severe audit. My people can be here in about three minutes. We'll take you to a little back room where we keep the scanners and figure out what you're keeping in your head."

He glanced from them to his wrist again, "Oh, you know about the scanner limitations. That's cool, that's cool, I'll



tell my boys to do an old-fashioned interrogation, then.”

Suds guggled in the drain. He tore brown paper towel from the dispenser and used it to twist the faucet handle. He scrutinized his unblemished face in the mirror. Smoothed the goatee.

“But there’s an alternate protocol we offer to people in your position, with all that prohibited learning, one that the Joint Control Office wants us to opt for though it’s less ideal than interrogation. You see, Animal Control’s had a spate of personnel shortages.”

Essin fought with the knot in their throat and rising vomit.

“There’s a door in behind the grocery store, down a little stairwell. It’s marked ‘authorized personnel only’ in loud red letters. Someone has tacked a lump of white gum to the crotch of the Y in ‘only.’ Guess what? You’re authorized personnel. Go through that door after your shift. You’ll have to walk for a while. You’ll see doors. Each door has two LEDs above the knob — one red, one green. Green is unlocked, red is electrified. Only one door will ever be unlocked. Keep going through unlocked doors until you reach your destination.





"You'll be putting that illegal knowledge to use for the public good. Don't worry about what you don't know. You'll have four weeks orientation and you'll pick things up pretty quick so long as you use that fucking head. You'll be wanting to ask your manager Honey, right? for morning or day shifts. Your shift's at night. If she gives you trouble, we'll know. Tell what's her name Lacie? Tell her that you're picking up extra shifts to make money. Use your fucking head, and you'll do fine."

Essin nodded. The cannon in the parking fired, din crackling through the walls. He dried his hands while the building's trembling settled.

"Your burger's ready," he said. "It didn't register with the cashier when you said to hold the pickles because she's been dealing with insomnia. Family fled south from the war and she's been having flashbacks since the cannon went off. Oh yeah, there's been a war going on up north for well on twenty years now. One second." He slipped two fingers into their pocket and plucked out the folded green pamphlet. "You won't need this. Dog's Ministry? That Darling asshole has a weird sense of humour." He chuckled. Then stopped, like his laugh ended with a botched edit, squinted at the paper while his jaws worked in his cheeks.



Shook his head. "Gonna have to go in for a goddamn audit myself after this. Motherfucker." Waved Essin away. "I said your burger's ready."

Hands slick and jittering.

Dusk clutched uneasy at the neighbourhood's exhaustion. The lane behind the grocery store was barren, its dumpsters festered, high hedges hid the transitway. The door was as the auditor said, though he'd omitted the vein-knotted cock-and-balls someone had drawn in white-out by the doorknob. Essin expected the handle to resist. It gave. An ill-lit hallway dwindled an improbable distance ahead of them, lined with a baffling number of identical khaki-painted doors. They stepped inside, hinges squealing shut behind them. Each door handle had a diode over it, most were red, but one was green. This one opened onto another long hallway, dark with the occasional bulb lighting a concrete islet between cold shadows.

Sometimes there was a stairwell, sometimes Essin realized they were heading down a ramp. Soon enough Essin felt as though they were descending into a mine. A tremendous stony mass accumulated above them with each step into that gloom. A private execution chamber, or a torture room, or something worse that they had not even imag-



ined, waited for them. A green light their sole direction, knowing that even if they could bear the doors' electrocution they'd have no luck finding their way back and they should've been counting and memorizing the whole long while.

Essin was almost shocked when a door opened into a booth, hardly bigger than a Walmart changing stall.

Equipment was mounted on the wall, a chipped military chest sat on the floor. A shallow locker for clothes and personal items stood in the corner, with no loop to attach a lock. Opaque and glassy as a rat's eye, a black-orb camera stared at them from above.

And the mask.

Mounted, centered, like a plutocrat's prized painting. It gleamed. Sockets boggling with electric sensors, face reflection inverted in the concave nasal triangle, meticulously crafted bicuspid, incisors, and molars. One incisor was eroded by grinding, another was crooked.

They ran their tongue along their teeth and it was then as their tongue struck the rough chip on their own incisor that epiphany hit them like a car wrapping a moose's leg.



As they ran their left thumb over the steel teeth, they ran their right thumb over the wet teeth in their mouth, and confirmed it: they touched their own skull, cloned in metal.

Outside, a door opened and someone shuffled in the hall. Without thinking (Essin was so relieved that another person interrupted the maze's coursing silence) they tried the door behind them. It was locked.

They probed the room. Noted the dent in the empty locker back. Hairline fracture in the concrete wall. At last cracked the chest.

Steel boots. Vulcanized rubber kilt and pants. Kevlar undershirt. Articulated armour plates on chest, arms, legs. Insulated gloves. Utility belt. Mechanical temperature regulation backpack. Jump suit shirt.

The suit's insides smelled like the specific petrichor that comes in April when it rains and there is still snow on the ground, teeming as though the raindrops woke things infesting the soil that winter hadn't quite extinguished. (Something in that smell comforted them. As though they stood on a fresh season's precipice.) Inside the suit's lining was meaty purple, veined with vasculature that squirmed





and pulsed like live arteries.

The uniform came with no guide to putting it on, but Essin remembered both Amelia and the auditor telling them to use their fucking head and muddled through. Hands sheathed in gloves, followed by the pants, articulated armor, the kilt. Shoved their head into a kevlar ski mask and the tightly-fitted hood which had three clips for the mask to clamp on—one on the skull's forward slope and one on each temple.

They removed the mask from its hook on the wall. Its interior was thick with apparatus. Behind the mask, dangling from a string on the same hook, was a small brown pleather case, like the one their father had used to hold the magnifier for looking at details on stones. They were surprised to open it and realize that it wasn't pleather, but real leather. Inside was an awl with a rounded ironwood handle. Essin stared at it for a moment, the awl's gleaming point, until they pieced together what it was for: this tool would cut a tally into their second face. Counting was not an informal practice, but a component of their kit—and, therefore, expected. Needles teemed on Essin's skin but whether it was what they'd understood or some calibration of their armor's mesentery they couldn't say.



They wrestled into the suit and pressed their face into the mask. Coolness wriggled from metal. Felt pads waited to accept pressure from their chin, cheeks, and brow. Each clamp's clack jolted their skull, and they felt a rattle where their teeth met their jaws. The eye holes glowed small screens, projecting from the outer goggles, implanted a faint tinnitic drill somewhere in the forebrain. It ran through diagnostics, bright white, swirling magenta, midnight blue, noxious green, then to true colours.

The deadbolt clacked behind them. The diode was green. Essin opened the door, spotted another green light at the hall's end.

It opened onto a briefing room, pale linoleum tiles, gray walls, the same flat void they'd experienced in dozens of community rooms, populated with chipped and battered folding chairs.

About fifty people crowded that underground room, in full controller uniform. AC left the lights off as the cohort shuffled in. After half the new controllers had tripped over their chairs, pawing their way through the room, a voice announced, "Lights will not be activated until all controllers have learned to use their infrareds." Some controllers fiddled with the dials on their masks and others





helped those next to them.

And the lights came on in a flare. Essin scrabbled against the white to set the image being fed to their eyes to true color.

A screen filled the whole front wall. It occurred to Essin that they were watching an image of an image. It flickered briefly. Two logos, Animal Control and the Joint Control Office, over a green meadow, against a blue sky where clouds roamed like serene old sheep. The scene faded to a man whose skin, tight over his uneven peach-pit head, made Essin think of a mildewed sock puppet on an over-large hand. He was lit as though with a single lamp in a basement. His eyes sat in sallow pits—huge and wet, they began by threatening the audience with a sagely wink. He stood in front of the meadow-image. Birdsong played over the speakers.

“It’s true,” he declared, tarantular hands gesturing like an emphatic Italian chef. “It’s true! It really is true, that there are more questions than answers. Am I right? Thanks.”

Essin wasn’t entirely clear on what they were being thanked for.



“What kinds of questions really intrigue you? Have you ever given this question some thought? I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. My intention was neither to ask nor to intrigue with a second question, well, to avoid asking you a third question, I’ll just let you read it.”

The speed and incoherence swaddled Essin in gentle confusion. It was cheap. The lighting on his skin said he didn’t belong against his background. But they hardly had time to register that, because at that point, in utter absurdity, in that underground basement encased in exoskeletal kevlar and circuitry and armour, the video footage faded into bright white Helvetica letters on a pale green background:

What is life?

And after a moment the thin man returned.

“May I reiterate the question?”

As panic squeezed their stomach lining Essin wondered what the fuck was going on.

“Thanks. What is life to you? Yes. What is life to you? Controllers, I’m going to give you some time to think about this question. What is life to you? Yes. What is life to you?”





The promise of time shattered as again the screen turned to text, a multiple-choice question:

- a. Life is a cabaret.*
- b. Life is a series of irrelevances, disappointments and pains strung together with a heartbeat.*
- c. Life is an experience.*
- d. Life is a symphony.*

Having been immersed in Starbucks' messianic corporate cultishness, Essin already knew the answer. It was ideological substrate for any first-world enterprise that ground people's lives into money, a substrate that held mummies and remains curved in rigor mortis that time would one day turn to fossils and some future oil baron would turn into air—but their familiarity with its absurd rhetoric rendered them immune to it. It was basic bullshit, everyone learned that, but you had to believe it at some point, if only for an instant, to make living possible. It wasn't for Essin, moments like this, but for the searchers yearning for a better life, the epiphany that they could choose who they would be and the course their life might take.



He'd return, the sock puppet man, and with another wise grin announce that this was a trick question, there was no right answer, their fate was their own and their happiness hinged on how they dared to look at their life.

Essin was wrong and the correct answer was D.

When the man came back, it was with an off-key rendition of "Start Spreading the News" that transitioned halfway through to a bit of "Cabaret" concluding on the high note of, "I'm so glad I joined Animal Control!" He warned the group off "C." even though it sounded right because they'd be tempted to, "succumb to subscribing to B." "A" was irrelevant, apparently.

"D" was the correct answer because: "Whether it's in a major or a minor key, we still have sweeping music bombarding our ears!"

And though Essin thought they ought to be seething in sarcasm, though they'd been with Lacie long enough that some weevil in their flesh understood the intent that sat behind what they were being told, they were so tired, and frightened, and not sure when it was going to end, sitting in a crowd completely alone and faceless, heart jackhammering so thankful that they still breathed and they



weren't weeping and shitting themselves and holding their own broken teeth in their palm in an Information Control van, that they embraced the sock-man's conclusion.

Parts within that had long fallen still were oiled, segments of self filmed in dust were brushed off, cleaned and restored. They believed they'd been given a serious question and that they were being given an opportunity to re-evaluate their life and maybe Lacie's cynicism and the cynicism they'd adopted was just a crass exoskeleton in which something softer and more important and maybe capable of something had been pressing to get out, to spread its wings like a goddamn butterfly and soar around helping flowers fuck so thriving green homogenous meadows might usurp the Earth's many wastelands.

"With apologies to Mr. Shakespeare, if music be the food of life, control on!"

But all the previous statements, the questions posed to their etiolated spirit, were build-up to that first orientation's ultimate question.

"What is a Controller?"

He waited, sallow face in full grinning rictus and flush with



fatherly knowledge their own father had never seemed to hold, as though he was by some unseen means watching his students through the screen, and tracking his audience's expressions through their masks.

"Someone who brings about life in the neighbourhood!"

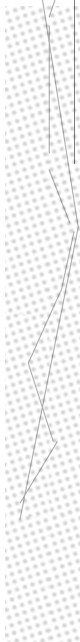
A slide phased in over him and for a moment he was a ghost against the words, CONTROL IS LIFE!

"This is because control is life!"

And it seemed so stunning in that moment, that they'd never realized that there a distinction between faith and belief, that worship was a shape that could act without an object, and without knowing it Essin had become a part of that faith, that worship, armored in a concrete cave cut in the suburban soil — their whole life this had been the absent piece from their jangling sense of what existence ought to be.

"Your guns are waiting for you," he'd returned. "Let me be the first to walk you through how to use them."

Wetness slid through their lips, salt graced their tongue, and it wasn't with horror but because they were resting





with a leviathan, which, though they'd long dreaded it, had set a kind hand on their shoulder and made a gentle offer: perhaps you can be happy.

Pictures rattled in their frames in the landlord's house and the rattling carried downstairs. Essin hardly felt the cannon thud through the profound and anxious rest that swallowed them each night after they stumbled home from orientation.

Lacie told Essin that she was going to have to start working early morning shifts in receiving at Indigo. The Christmas busy season started early at the bookstore, and rollouts were scheduled near-nightly and inventory wouldn't track itself. (Sunny Sunday had slaughtered the once thriving web of online fulfillment that had animated commerce at the millennium's turn, drones stalling and servers broiled and GPS satellites fried. Retail, ratty and resilient, was glutted with necessities it now filled.)

Essin hid relief with a kiss and Lacie mistook it for a gesture of despair.

"It'll be fine," she said. "It's just for a little while." Gray-



ness pressed its thumbs into Lacie's eyes and she sizzled with preoccupation. If she sensed Essin's terror it didn't translate to a comforting gesture and Essin wasn't sure anyway if that's what they craved. As though to be touched too well meant they'd be found out.

Refugees trickled in, trickle thickened to a stream. They came from little tourist towns, places for antique marts and farmer's markets and weddings evacuated as they were being leveled. Thin agricultural centers smudged out, the bare four-street places where you could order magic mushrooms on your pizza. Once-steady soil had risen to claim their homes. Animal Controllers escorted them, silver masks gleaming in the sun as they rode on jittering jeeps and motorbikes.

(Essin pictured the dirt revolting. Tremors didn't reach into Animal Control's maze, the cannon fire fell well beneath perception that far underground — or was drowned by clatter in the firing range as Essin obliterated paper targets with a blunderbuss.)

Animal Control barricaded countryside roads. People limped in on foot, their possessions in backpacks or dragged behind them in suitcases, gazing dead-eyed at the neighbourhood's plastic housing blocks. The Sportsplex





closed. Indoor fields became hives of tents and sleeping bags. Community centers fell under information quarantine, barricaded behind tall concrete and barbed wire. Sometimes children's voices leapt over the walls and children in the outer neighbourhood would toss balls or frisbees in for them to play with. Any building half-used became a compound. A blurring patrolled their perimeters they were Animal Controllers, they had the insignia for AC and notched masks but as Essin passed on their way home from orientation, Information Control vans stood nearby, and notices from IC were pasted to the building walls. Essin thrilled as their thoughts flickered on whether the two departments were brought together by cooperation or antagonism.

Perhaps the people there were tainted with something from the new animals. Secrecy blistered over them. Animal Control shot down a civilian glider that went out to investigate the countryside, and the incident was quickly elided by the news. Omissions foamed, holes turning moments to marrow.

Now when in lulls Essin leaned out the drive-through window they spotted caravans. Animal Control AVPGs rolling out to vanish in the haze. Beyond the neighbourhood, they

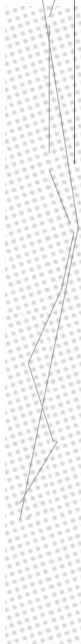


broke from the road and crushed the crops, threw dust high in autumn's dry air. Jet planes screeched overhead and helicopters thundered low over the box stores. Hearts jackhammered. Nerves tugged taut. Time bled and waking and sleeping each became hard to distinguish from the other.

Cars could hardly steer in the drive-through. Essin scalded their hands and spilled drinks and made them wrong and then made them again. Autumn morning light reddened by artillery pollution.

The Chief, recorded, addressed Essin and their cohort at their last orientation session before they'd, in his words, "Hit the pavement."

"Well, folks, it seems our cities are in a state that some people of a more cowardly colouring consider perilous. However, as this country's commander, let me tell you, that the Chief sees no peril. He sees only challenges. Now, you might have heard rumours about these creatures. I can't say much but these things are rough and tough, let me tell you, just ridiculous, but they are in the final analysis just animals. I'm optimistic that we'll prevail. We don't know what they were, so we just call them grootslangs. You folks are going to provide a necessary service in support-





ing our Controllers fighting the grootslangs and don't worry, we won't be tossing just any volunteers out to fight them. (That means you.) No, Animal Control is being given military resources to address our friends in the countryside. The best of this country's best are on the front lines, right now, the very horizons of our new, our golden epoch. And you people have been give the noblest job: protecting the home front! Good luck out there, and remember, the chief's got your back!"

Summer at last succumbed to coolness. Essin dressed in fleece, and Lacie closed the basement window against the chilly night. They collapsed together without saying a word. Lacie's fingers ran gentle on their belly for a while, then fell still.

The next day was their first patrol. Their suit had been sprayed with an insignia: a dung beetle rolling a skull since the volunteer corps was called the Dung Beetles. Their number was also sprayed to the chest and the temperature pack on their back: 383 their name when they wore that suit.

A calico tabby watched them from the bushes. 383 kneeled



and flickered their fingers because they knew turning on their mask's external speaker would just make horror sounds that would spook her away. They set their lenses to true colour and she was watching them back with an eye that was green and an eye that was gray. Dusk plucked at the neighbourhood's fatigue. The other controllers in their unit were sweeping a playground, kicking the sand and swatting at the bushes. 383 reached out their hand to the cat, her colours, and she watched them, scraggled, scabbed, ribby. A stray. She opened here pink mouth and yowled. A tooth was missing.

"It's ok," Essin muttered, knowing she wouldn't hear but believing perhaps that just saying it would transfer something the cat could understand into their body, "It's all right. I won't hurt you."

She had a spot on her nose, blinked slow at Essin. Ran her whiskers against their fingertips and even through the suit they felt her purring. One eye was closed and the other was open and watched them.

And her body began to shiver. 383 assumed at first it was just a cat gesture, something suddenly spurring her to bristle, a sound or smell that didn't register on their mask's many sensors. But the quaking mounted, bulges





moved beneath her skin, like her bones crawled into new positions. If she was in pain she made no noises. No. Her purring mounted as 383 withdrew their hand. She stood, she stretched, she rubbed her shaking whiskers against the lowest prongs of the brush. Plates moved in her head, its shape was changing, flattening sideways, gray eye shut and green eye widening, fixed on them. Something cracked the air, nearby, not gunshot or cannon. They felt a brief heat, like a candle-flame, over their heart. Something hot and wet trickled in their suit and they realized it was their temperature because it was blood.

They understood then, its neck growing longer, eye migrating, mouth bending to a pointed v, that they were witnessing a replacement. On their first fucking patrol.

History would mark this among the most abrupt and comprehensive replacements. Not just house cats recast but the whole cat family, worldwide, in a single strike. 383's heart would've been erased by the new cat's eye if the transformation had been complete, for the new cat's eyes could make holes wherever they looked. The calico's green eye boiled, black pupil wide, glowing in the lowering light, as 383 ran, hailing the crew, the book worms who listened and recorded, the silent brains folded together at the



Cephalon, wherever it was down in the mycelium, “New cats!” they shouted into the mic, “New cats! I just saw one, the cats are new!”

“This is Cephalon. Reviewing Dung Beetle 383 facial observation footage. Pending. Confirmed. Dung Beetle Unit Four One Two please circle up, terminate, bring sample to designated mycelium drop-off point.”

The controllers, grim reapers, gathered around the half-new cat: still mid-morph, limbs longer now and thin as wires, body bunched together, face now formed like a gun with a single eye as its muzzle — enemy guns aimed at it where it stood.

Essin was not the target for the second shot: it was the controller next to them. They fell face-forward, dead, a perfect hole scooped from the center of their face to make a clean concavity. While Essin watched another controller howled over the comms, “My arm! My fucking arm!”

And Essin wasn’t sure who spoke and it took them a moment to catch that their colleague’s arm was dangling, held in place by a flap of armpit skin — like an ice cream spoon had removed their shoulder. “What the fuck!”





And the half-new cat bolted, scrambling up a pine tree (blast, pale wood, resin) the whole squad shooting now to kill it (howl on the comms) and it leapt to the next tree (she leapt to the next tree) onto a fence, took one last shot, and vanished into a backyard.

Essin heaved breaths.

“Dung Beetle Unit Four One Three report.”

They waited for a colleague to pick up.

“DB Four One Three, please report.”

They waited. Nobody answered. They looked around. It had been a unit of seven and four were dead and the other two were clutching at stumps where limbs had been and 383 knew from the blood puddles where they writhed those two would probably be dead soon.

They stumbled. Finding words seemed like pressing through a thorny bramble.

“Casualties,” they croaked. “Six.”

Returning home from that first field shift. They’d waited until an AC ambulance arrived and their unit’s leftovers



vanished into its back. HQ crackled directions over a radio to link them with another unit attempting to capture a new cat, without success. They ground their teeth, shuddered. Turned a corner and saw a decapitated torso. A shootout with a litter of new kittens was underway. Far away three cars exploded as a stray new cat shot hit them. The suit's strong smell: dirt bombarded by rain. Their earlier nostalgia numbed them.

Lacie was asleep and they pressed themselves to her, wrapped around her as well as they could, but her body wouldn't respond save through the thin air between her lips that tickled their fingers.

As they wrestled with sleep Essin would perhaps reason that this was their opportunity for purpose, the crawling doubts that chewed their life since they'd left high school at last loosed their slimy gums. Perhaps something hovered over, a sense that there would be consequences if the rules, stated by the fortplex's construction, were violated. Its mycelium being a maze implied forbidden hearts and paths that must be adhered to, hazards outside sight, potential oubliettes. Essin didn't know whether or not there were punishments or if people who didn't arrive to work simply disappeared to be replaced.



But pressing into the lavender shirt that smelled so much like Lacie's skin Essin was keen and sure that they'd return to the labyrinth. They rose, put a pot on for camomile tea. Perhaps another night they would need sleep. Decided to shower while it cooled. They were a protector now, whether they had chosen it or not. Opportunities for a purposeful life sprayed at their feet. They needed only stoop to catch them.

A cannon cracked against the sky and ambulances wept all night bearing the dead and wounded and those with stumps and missing limbs to the hospitals. In the shower Essin touched the wet pink wound over their heart, the place where their skin had just barely been shaved away mid-metamorphosis by the new cat. With a loofah they scrubbed the clotted blood from the down running from their chest to their belly, with fingernails worked the scabs from their pubic hair.

They were glad for Lacie's distance that night. They pictured her fingers brushing the wound and asking after its origin and being unable to improvise a plausible lie. It was the kind of thing she was good at, coming up with a fib on the spot.

Essin imagined asking Lacie What's the best way I can lie



to you? Then chuckled.

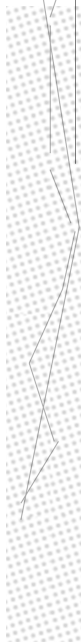
“What’s funny?” she muttered.

“Go back to sleep.”

Addendum:

She came from a different valley, a place where, prior to the glaciers’ expansive crawl over the earth, other lions had thrived. But then people showed up and extinguished lions and all megafauna save, somehow, the elephants. Deer replaced their terror of lions with a terror of the forked denuded hunters that pursued them with arrows through the brush.

Millennia passed. The forest churned and grew, its limbs fanned out and its wooden bodies made new topsoils and probed deep through the earth to underground waters. Far away cities blossomed and farther still picks tore open the earth and heaved fragmented fossilized tree-bodies from carboniferous swamps and turned those mummies into atmosphere. Then they looked to the oil for the same ends and its precipitates became the sky. Fantastic heat came soon after, pressing over continents, and the seas’ high waters bobbed with pale-bellied fishes whose rot sustained





bristlemouths surviving far below. Woodlands blazed and in the high arctic a freakish war raged. In that era, the battalion came to the lions' valley. They were police officers and former soldiers and international mercenaries. A bauxite mine was slated to demolish the woods and infest the rivers with runoff. Indigenous guerrillas were obstructing development with bombs and sabotage. The ragtag regiment had its core in a brigade of elite soldiers who'd fought in high mountainsides: feral, bearded, and tattooed. They brought with them their mascot, a lioness.

Though she had never met another lion since her birth, once in the valley it became clear she was pregnant. The veterinarian they had flown in could only conclude that it was divine conception. In town a few crazier locals claimed they'd seen the valley sun take the shape of a shivering yellow ghost lion and sneak into her cage. And while few of the soldiers were superstitious, the regiment accepted this conclusion, even the pasty mercenaries continuing their tundra wars seemed unsurprised, but in this balmy country little was reported about the biological anomalies they'd confronted above the tree line.

The lioness whelped a single pup. From the day of her birth her coat was golden. Her eyes were like clear am-



ber. Right from the get-go, those at her birth knew that as long as this lion was a part of the battalion, they would win every fight and it was just a matter of time before the guerrillas were quashed.

She was, after all, born with a mane.

She grew through creeping years, seasons of tense, rain-soaked solitudes pierced by vicious episodes where gore painted wet forest leaves and feral infantry emptied magazines into dead insurgents, dry ages when the woodland creaked from the heat and the battalion went on sprees after guerrilla encampments, raping whoever they could and lashing corpses to trees as warnings. Soldiers cheered and saluted the lion, passing alongside her mother. She grew to be enormous, a cat like no one had ever seen. At its lowest point, her back rose higher than the tallest man's shoulders, and her mane spread like sun-bolts through disintegrating clouds.

On the day her mother was slain (insurgents had surrounded the camp and bombarded it with rocket propelled grenades) the maned lioness charged into the attackers' ranks without hesitation and slaughtered twenty guerrillas, leaving three alive with broken legs as prisoners she dragged to the colonel's tent, where they were tortured for weeks



until they died.

That colonel was Colonel Ashbrecht. He was a pale soldier from the north and he was on loan from his government, whose sponsors had purchased a stake in the bauxite mine. It was deemed Joint Control Office business and while he was here to train the garrison in counter-insurgency, he often joined the trainees in the jungle. And while he was suspicious of animals from having seen them transform, he understood the lion and understood why she was important and had the mother lion burned on a pyre with the other casualties.

As the meat-smoke and wood burned around him and the brooding sky threatened another deluge he bellowed to the soldiers, "We're going to fuck them to death!" And they cheered.

The daughter took her place as the company mascot.

Ashbrecht didn't have an opportunity to finish fucking the guerrillas to death (though many met this fate in the following months) before he was recalled again to Canada. The JCO was confronted with their own indigenous resistance rising up in Athabasca. Their management efforts were unpopular and they needed hatchet men.



A new colonel came. He was a dirty bastard. He ate little, liked young women, hated animals. He seemed disgusted at the sight of the maned lioness and called her a hermaphrodite. She answered his hatred by shaking her mane. And he answered her defiance by isolating her in a cage, feeding her nothing but chicken bones flecked with gristle no matter how much the regiment protested and warned him that it would bring bad luck.

So one evening, while the general was trying to mount a girl he'd picked up from a guerrilla encampment in the woods, the lioness burst into his tent and mauled him. She didn't kill him, though anyone who knew him before would be hard-pressed to recognize him through the scars. He was paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life, his face a stitched mess grafted from skin on his ass that grew scraggled hairs. It was rumored that he sustained a substantial injury to his groin. The girl escaped back to the woods, blood-baptised but alive.

An extensive search was undertaken to find who had unlocked her cage, but no guilty party was found. Suspicions mounted that she'd managed to pick the lock with her claws.

A truck arrived from the bauxite mine. The lioness was



sedated, and carried away to a veterinarian for execution.

That very day it was as though the jungle in fury uprooted itself and fell on them. Guerrillas flanked the regimental base from the woods. When it was clear they were being overwhelmed the acting colonel declared a retreat but all roads were blocked by toppled trees and so they could only flee to the woods where the regiment scattered to be slaughtered to the man.

The lion escaped. The truck that was meant to carry her to her death was discovered overturned in a ditch, her captors evaporated.

For many years she vanished, assumed swallowed by the trees, until a lion matching her description appeared at a circus, even larger, amid a host of lesser lions, who bowed in her presence. Even the lion tamer, a man famed for his pride, showed polite diffidence in her presence. At that circus, she caught the eye of a lumber tycoon and part-time criminal who was traveling abroad. He collected exotic animals. He made the ringmaster very rich and brought the lion to his home in Canada, where she was treated as a fellow prince and business partner for years on an estate not far from the suburb where Essin lived.



When the old man died in his bed, the lion lost all attachment to the place, and leaped over the walls of the mansion, vanishing into the countryside while panicking servants called Animal Control—who stated they were occupied with new animals, and that this was more a matter for the police, who said it was a matter for Animal Control.

While 383 some miles away crouched and looked at a starved calico cat in the bushes, the lion crouched in the forest. It was dusk and the woods were rich with life. She even heard centipedes rustle in the leaf litter. The moon fell on her shoulders. She closed one eye. Her body grew long, her limbs wiry and bunched, her face elongating to something like a cannon.

Through her replacement, her pelt stayed gold as the sun, her mane flowed back from the gunnish thing that was her face.

Beneath her feet the ground rumbled, heartbeats thudding and hammering, tectonic breathing. She sensed it. The transformation that took her came with coded instructions in her brain on how to use her body. It was almost as though this potential shape had lurked inside her throughout her existence and it only took this moment to discover what she knew already. The deadly organ



that made a spear of absences also let her see through the earth, the roaming things deep in the clay's clutches, probing upwards, pulled by sympathetic thunder from suburban cannons.

Her great eye roved.

She roared.

Around her the leaves and trunks and boughs erupted with holes as though subjected to a barrage of bullets.



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Name: Natalia Tomirovna

Birthday: somewhere between April and August, 2006

Sex: Female

Occupation: none

Likes: deer, rabbits, wild strawberries in the winter, the feeling when you lift up a piece of wood and a thousand insects run free, the first snowflakes of winter

Dislikes: pickled cabbage, spoiling food, sleepless nights, Russian homework

Blood type: unknown

Seen with: "Mama was particularly proud of her embroidery, as me and my sisters would always be clad in beautiful woolen frocks woven with red and golden threads. The wool was Papa's gift; on the way back and forth from the marketplace that laid in the camp beyond the canyon. Even in the grayest, dullest moments, I could carry the radiant sun with me."



by: [nekosattva](#)

NATASHA'S DIARY, FOR MONDAY RUSSIAN II

I know I was asked to write about a day in my mother's life, but looking out the window of our little cottage, my mind cannot help but stay fixated on the war. To the others, it seems abstract. Papa's daily routine of feeding the animals, cutting wood, and traveling to the camp is for now unaffected. Mama tells me that no worry should distract from the duties of preparing food or maintaining the home. My sisters are lost in little fantasies of banditry and social upheaval; bless Papa for offering no protest even when my sisters ask for Chernyshevsky's 'What to do?' and Bely's 'Peterburg.' I find no comfort in these dreams, dreamt by children who have yet no reason to wake up.

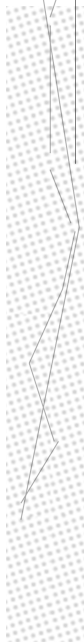
Last night our family came to visit, and they tell us their kin have had to flee their farms. To avoid the camps, they paid coyotes to traffic them out of the Zone towards the East. They say there is 'ummah,' but Papa never believed in such things. He told our family they would never be accepted no matter what



religion, for their people were old enemies from ancient times and tales of killing told through song could not be forgotten no matter how dried and old the blood may be. One of our kin took offense to this and accused Papa of being a pagan and an unbeliever. Papa got angry and raised a stick, threatening to beat him if he did not retract his words. The women yelled and shouted for peace; I heard it through the window, covering myself with my sheet to stay hidden. I heard Mama crying; she lamented that in times of difficulty and need, people turned towards each other rather than work together.

I had another sleepless night. At first, the soft sweetness of tiredness brought me comfort. But I felt my limbs become stiff, my muscles aching with strain. A sudden chill came through my body like a rushing river, and its sound filled my ears with a terrible clamor.

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Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



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Last Time

on the run from shells and starvation, yelena learns of the resident deity of the zone known only as nay-toe; a voiceless girl soon joins her within the ruins.



CW: war, corpses, cannibalism, intrusive thoughts, blood, religious extremism

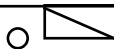
“This machine kills JayBay-stans--” etched onto the side of an air-to-surface missile. Log onto the live feed, right above the handbag ads. Stats? Eight-hundred-thousand dollars. Produced in the backwaters of some former swamp. Out of the congealed blood ‘n mud, family trees sucked on by mosquitos, and one-thousand-four-hundred pounds of subsonic might. Faster than any rushing river. It tumbles down, leaking beneath the hatches. Watch as the frightening mega-size of the bending Earth collapses into claustrophobic darkness... perfect hit, beautiful delivery. W’s in chat. Hearts galore. Beating red. “JayBay-stans when they stay silent about the allegations...” it disappears, gone all’uh sudden. Buried by perfect cheekbones, glittering in the sun of somewhere exotic enough.

Ah.

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EBV01D0
0T1BICE2
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SKY
PHOTOGRAPH



Natalia shakes her, stirring her awake from a deep, buzzing sleep. “Ah,” Yelena feels her heart drop. Natalia’s face frightened her, its lit side cratered and dark like a moon. They’d driven through the night, and parked underneath the cover of low trees. Yelena squeezed her face, her arms - she’d hoped it was a dream, a hallucination. Fear and disappointed burned in her throat for a few moments, but it died away soon enough. “I’m thirsty... pitj,” she pointed at her mouth. Natalia stared blankly for a few moments, then reached down for a motor oil canister filled with water. Yelena drank from the greasy vessel with pained gulps, her throat heaving then shrinking, to Natalia’s simultaneous disgust and interest. She’d seen so many dead, littered along the sides of the road, that the strange animate movements of a living body seemed novel. She insisted, pulling the canister from Yelena’s hands, on pouring some of the clean water onto the Earth. She imagined humans growing from the soil like apples.

Natalia opened the door of the truck, seeking an escape from the dull stench of the truck, and parted the leaves to step onto the road. Slivers of orange fire came through the trees, casting embers before her feet. A stream had broken free from punctured pipes, and she washed her blackened feet in the icy water. She thought of its source,



the rushing water that corrodes the reflection of all that comes across. She closed her eyes-- her face rushed beyond the splintered trees, pulp-y gore strewn over the floor and the now still branches. There comes the chill; rapacious, all her senses taken from her. She looked at her reflection, broken and otherworldly. The chill turned to a sharp flame that welled up into her heart. You won't take me-- she slapped herself, and enjoyed the quieting pain as the flame petered out to a brittle warmth. She spied a few mushrooms at the side of the road, and pulled them out of the chalky soil. Yelena stretched her limbs, a few yoga poses, whatever she could remember. She smelled her clothes, heavy with her own stench. Natalia looked so small, shrunken; Natalia seemed to Yelena like a broken puppet as she stepped down the road beside the rusted guard rails with a cluster of mushrooms in her arms. Natalia dropped them on the asphalt, then poured some of the canister's water to wash them of their mud. She offered them to Yelena, a shiny white mushroom in her palm: "jadovityj," Yelena cried. Natalia shook her hand, shook her hand again, then ate it herself, a small smile escaping her mouth as she crunched and munched. Yelena waited, anxiously chewing her finger, then reached down to taste the mushrooms for herself. They were earthy and chewy; they tasted like the essence of the forest itself, sullen with



decaying corpses and ancient decay. Tears welled up in her face-- the organic matter was a terrible reminder that she herself was still alive.

The truck took a few attempts to start, and Yelena worried that the fuel was draining rapidly from the tank. Natalia could not, or would not, speak of how many more miles laid ahead of them. Maybe she'd misunderstood Natalia's childish symbols, and maybe Nay-toe had abandoned Yelena to her fate. While her eyes traced the sickening lines painted onto the asphalt, she thought of the many ways she might die. She thought of her own hunger, feasting on Natalia's bones, drinking her blood. She thought of her skull flattened, pinkish goo spurting forth from her cavities, and Natalia's dead face getting redder with her every swing into Yelena's head. She wiped the sweat from her face, she knew these were childish fantasies, a petulant seeking of release. Natalia sucked on her thumb, watching the many burnt tanks, cars drenched in ash. They seemed like clay statues, brilliantly bleached by the lazy haze of morning sun. She tried to think of happier things-- a doe deer hobbled down 'tween the stones, licking at a rotting tree branch. Where do they go when they disappear? They burrow their heads in little kingdoms of soil, far away from the whizzing of jet-powered bombs and howitzer shells.



The hungry little rat has no mind for the rotting dead, their texture no different from the soft mushy branches or the hot mud. The bird sits perched upon the trees, distant and fearless, finding her safety in the emptiness of blue skies. The bunny cowers beneath the canopy. Run, little bunny, run; it will find you.

Those beautiful green eyes, staring back at you. She remembers it, scowling as it cowered in the tattered grass 'tween the broken wooden fence. Its muzzle was sticky with old blood, its teeth tired and grey. It exposed its teeth, drawing in a wheezy breath. Natalia approached it, feeling her head thump as she extended a hand to it. She stared back, deeper into its eyes to lose herself in a sea of deep jade. Its grimace died away, raising its head as a whine escaped from its mouth. Now he seemed so small, in Natalia's grasp, his fur like a tooth brush. The creature crouched, made a loud whine, then tore Natalia's hand with his broken teeth. Blood seeped from the tear, oozing from her thumb to her index finger.

The camp laid in the canyon, surrounded by tall fences girded with rusting barbed wire and tattered flags. The rust embraced the metal with orange vines, a thread that ran from abandoned cars to shattered helmets and bro-



ken armaments. Yelena followed the symbols of stars, Nay-toe's great crest, drawn in the sand. They left the truck beneath a few trees, beside other rusted cars covered in plastic bags and soggy cardboard. The towers overlooking the camp had fallen into disrepair, metal screws and loose steel plundered. Nay-toe's presence was felt, not through her soldiers, but by the tents protected by her holy seal. They walked down a path, parted before them in a sea of tents. A few old men sat around a grill, their bellies fattened by cheap beer. Women washed their children, soapy water pouring down to a brown lake of open waste. Discarded plastic cracked beneath their feet like seashells as they passed by the tents, falling under the sharp gaze of the folk. Natalia pointed at them, then at herself; Yelena's nervous trembling was broken by Natalia's hand sudden grasping her own. An expression of kinship, but to protect whom? She saw men hanging from a pillar, their faces sunken and bulbous. Nay-toe's light no longer reached us, for we've fallen into dark depths. They followed the chatter, the shouting, some words familiar; "bazar?" Yelena asked Natalia. Natalia's face remained trained before her, her eyes watching the shadows between the tents.

The path opened up to bustling crowds, milling about many stands which sold plastic household goods, flags,



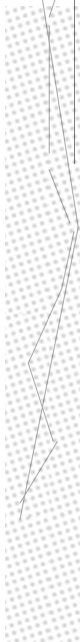


souvenirs, knives, carvings, shoes... the stand beside them was covered in a blue tarp, with the uniforms of sports-teams hanging from plastic fasteners. The man, his beard black and thick like moss, waved and beckoned Yelena: "privjet, privjet-- lutsheij tseny." Dozens of sneakers were arranged like a bouquet before him, in pink, red, blue. Beyond him a man played on a wooden flute, laid before him were medals full of stars and wings. Yelena inspects them, tarnished and misshapen. Natalia played with a few colorful pebbles, arranged by value across a large table. The woman at the table huffed when Natalia let them clatter onto the table. Some of the medals featured tanks, some featured corn and hemp. The world before her was a world of only commerce; without community, without commonalities like flags or words. The only thing that connected us was an exchange. And she'd remembered the symbols from her childhood, the shapes of the many languages and mannerisms that once mingled freely 'tween the car parts and boutique military uniforms. Now it's only memories of glints in another's greedy eye, the dust that collects on a weary mind-- those of us left behind by the world have only the refuse of its yesterdays to hold and sell. Nay-toe takes, Nay-toe gives. Natalia's thoughts slowly drifted away, and she felt herself overwhelmed by the smell of burning meat upon coals. Her stomach rumbles as she watched the



meat turn on a spit, a man with an ashy face flapping a piece of cloth over it. Steady, she mumbles... she takes one and runs into the crowd, hearing the commotion behind her slowly recede away. She takes a turn into a dark, blue corner; sitting underneath the canopy of drying carpets, she gnaws on the meat.

Yelena drifted from one assortment of filthy plastic goods to another, her face warm as she studied the ways a CD tray, a broken bumper, foamy noodle-cups could be repurposed. She let herself be seduced into romance; to live off the plastic of the land, in harmony with garbage. She saw on the hill mansions of styrofoam, cardboard, gates made of molten figurines. She thought of pastoral nomads, roaming the black rivers of plastic, from one landfill to the next, fattening their horses on paper and battery acid. A slow death is what it means to be autonomous. This is how she overcomes her anxiety-- thinking of herself as an abstraction, a vector with a direction and nothing else. She is merely the effect of some great ancient cause, a sharp point shot by a cosmic bow. Have no fear; you're merely an expression of Nay-toe's will. She walks by a table arranged with broken electronic wares; phones with cracked screens, laptops missing keys, umbilical machines and octopus devices. Across a path of trampled fruit, she finds a





tent surrounded by towers of books. They were in languages she could not understand, in scripts of cracked noodles and spikes, shapes made of iconograms and dripping ink... she approached the shortest tower and drew a book from the top: "Fluency in Love Languages," the corners wilted by moisture. A few books strewn by the entrance of the tent were written in Russian, degraded but by the drawings evidently childish. She drew one at random, "cvetik semicvetk," and entered the tent.

A bearded man sat on a carpet with his legs beneath him, a cigar burning in his mouth as he raised his hands to the sky like an arrow. He mumbled to himself, his eyes shut but twitching. "Ayin'pes dvats, ayin'pes das." The star-encrusted crest of Nay-toe hung around his neck. Yelena shuffled closer, holding the children's book like a shield over her heart. She cleared her throat. The man's eyes suddenly opened and he twitched in surprise. "Gheneres," he spat. Yelena shrunk in embarrassment, suddenly shy as if catching him nude. "Ne panimayu," she croaked. The bearded man studied Yelena closely: her dirty shoes, coarse and matted hair, tattered Adidas jacket, a softness to her accent that betrayed a constitution alienated by the Zone. He remembered one of Kali Hichi's thoughts: "lead the 'iskatyl' on his way. When he finds his 'vetsy' in what



he's looking for, you will find yours in him." The bearded man pointed to his own heart, drawing a star with his fingers. "Siela," he whispered. Yelena pointed to herself, "Yelena." The bearded man shook his head, the ash from his cigar falling onto his hairy legs. He draw the star again, pointed to the sky, then pointed to Yelena's chest: "sie-la." He smiled, satisfied. Yelena tried to hold her laughter by forcefully biting her tongue, and placed the children's book onto the table before the bearded man. "Ya khotel by kupitj." The bearded man chuckled, and took a book from a stack beside him. He placed it beside the children's book, and its red plastic cover glowed brilliantly beneath the candle light. He tapped the red book with his finger. Yelena read the cover, embossed with the words "the Twenty-Four Thoughts." Yelena looked up from the book, her nose irritated and swollen. "Shto eta?" The bearded man put his hands above him, pointing again at the sky like an arrow. "Kali Hichi," he pronounced each syllable clearly. Yelena took the last of the cakes she'd hidden in her jacket and placed it onto the table, carefully pondering his empty reaction. "Spasiba," she mumbled before taking both books and leaving the tent with her head slack and covert.

THE FIRST THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:



« In the beginning, Nay-toe created the Zone. Nay-toe had seen the creations of other GODS, 'borg,' and disliked how each act further and further infringed upon the infinite freedoms of nothingness. So when Nay-toe created the Zone, he created not things but possibilities, so that the Zone may hold in its nothings every desire, inclination, tendency, and want imaginable. And within the garden of this nothingness, MAN, or 'monzhj,' was finally free to live as he wanted. And-- ... »

Yelena shut the red book, feeling disorientated and alone. She looked at the sunken faces around her, penetrating her with their covetous gazes, hoping to attract a costumer. A stone sunk in her stomach, and she felt the contents well up into her mouth. She held the red book to her chest, shut her eyes, and prayed for the spell to last just a little longer. There is no life left for her to lose. Christine had taken it away from her.

She drifted down corridors, unsure of where she'd wanted to be... besides somewhere not where she was. The thought that she could not walk away from herself made her esophagus well up in pain. Her blurry vision became filled with lingerie, fat-masking underwear, bras hanging from hooks like a butcher. Thousands of football jerseys formed solid



borders of colors and numbers, and she felt herself collapsed between rows of handbags so large they extended into the horizon. She felt vomit trickle from 'tween her teeth. A few children laughed at her from broken windows above the stores. She opened the book again, reading on from where she'd stopped before.

« ... for a while, it was good. But the Zone was ancient, stretching from the beginning of time 'till its theoretical end. And 'monzhj's' time was not endless, but far more limited than his desires would allow. So 'monzhj,' needing to speak for the first time, said to Nay-toe: "Nay-tschoel! You need not know of death, for you are the maker of life. But I will die, and thus disappear, and with me disappear all desires, inclinations, tendencies, and wants. Then, what does that all amount to in the end?"

Nay-toe did not respond. Nay-toe never did respond.

And thereby, 'monzhj' become enlightened, and he understood: Nay-toe takes, Nay-toe gives. Eh, nothing you can do about that. »

Strange.

Natalia woke up from her sleep, feeling the sun pour





through a hole onto her face. She saw a few children poke at a dead dog with a stick, their faces in curious glee as its eye oozed with purple blood. The children ran when Natalia approached, as if she were not a child anymore. Had it been longer than she'd thought? She looked at herself in a puddle of water beside a rusting pipe, and felt a crushing fear burn into her face. Her molten cheek, heavy with a lip of skin, startled her. She felt her body stiffen with tension as she tried to suppress the memory, fragments of red and orange accompanied by machine noises. She took the stick and drove it into the dead dog's head, hearing it crack as she broke through its face. All better now. She felt thirsty, and set out looking for Yelena.

Oh. You might find yourself drifting from one stall to another, inhaling yet another whiff of old leather and indistinct spices. Down there in Butcher's Lane, as the locals call it, every manner of vice the Zone might offer lies temptingly before you on sale. Or at least, that's what the old wives say. You can see them whispering to each other, each arm carrying white plastic baggage filled with oranges, tobacco, used clothing, toiletries. Their heads are shielded from the sun by beautifully-etched patterned cloth, and their lips parched but still eager red. Further down the market, pass by the chain-link fences enclosing



another ad hoc set of favelas, you can find men playing cards underneath the shade of mulberry trees overlooking a sandy football field. Did they leave their sleepy little villages, abandon their sheep and pigs, for the vast emptiness of possibilities within the Zone? Or did the Zone come for them first, slowly sucking up their periphery with ambient demand that hummed in the air like radiation? Suddenly the air sits uncomfortably in your belly, weighing down on every exhale. It's here. You feel him now. Nay-toe's heavy presence. The sand of your life slips through your fingers and becomes the glass panes of a luminous mall, overlooking the parking lot that spreads like blight over the valley. And no-one will listen to you talk about how the Zone once howled not with trucks but only dreams.

Oh. Yelena finds herself in front of a dazzling wall of t-shirts, all of them adorned with mythological figures; some contemporary, some forgotten. Ducks, dusty-haired heroes and heroines, and friendly monsters. Did the world arrive here late, or never at all? A child wore a superhero t-shirt, a little too large with its hem draped over his knees. He dug it up out of burnt wreckage, wore it like the tattered relic of an ancient and forgotten civilization. That shit boosie. She saw a figment of Christine beside her, a ghostly outline of her. She hung one of the shirts before



herself, Raeggae Martin emblazed & embossed, with fat doob smokin', wisps rising to the sky. She heard her voice; not words, but a rising lilt carved into the air... like if torn cloth could speak, a scissor down its throat. "Fuckin' gay," Christine spat. Yelena pulled out t-shirts with her hand, each one a new atrocity with garish colors and decals that crumble with touch. Out of the cracks of the bakery came Christine again, dressed in Balenciaga & Gucci, their threads frayed and leather dull: "being the kind of retard that wears fake co-tour." From the sewers, she walked on by wearing basketball swag with the 'GENUINE' tag swaying like jewellery, Yeezyies caked with horse-archer dust. An army of her; they pull on my muddy rags, giggling at every frayed edge. "Wouldn't you be embarrassed if they found you dead in this?" Yelena thought of how she'd look as a corpse, if her hair would be scattered like sunbeams and if her face would be pink and blushing. The emptiness of that thought made everything else feel hollow & artificial, as if the beautiful mountains there in the distance behind the river was merely a painting on a large wooden frame, turned to ochre pulp within the blink of an R-36's detonation. Nothing remains but you and I, smoldering upon an orange disk. Let a flood of light wash out the rest.

Beside two t-shirts, on the left "Show Me Your Tits," on the



right "John 3:16," Yelena saw in XXL a blown-up face-- his chin scruffy, sideburns long and unkempt, an expression of solid strength betrayed by sensitive eyes. Rendered only in black and white, a checkered scarf around his sleek neck. It can't be. He'd disappeared. Forgotten as a suicide case. There were others. Behind the wooden bars. In M, L. Elon Rao's face on all of them. She caught the shop-keep's gaze, and pointed at the shirts everywhere. "Kto eta takoi? Etot chuvak." The shop-keep smiled. He explained that he was a legend to the Muslims who once lived in the Zone, respected as a warrior who believed in an allegiance to all men despite his national origin. He said Elon's grave had become a landmark in the Zone, guarded and protected by heavily armed nomads hardened by Nay-toe's trials. He's said to have lost his life in the final violent confrontation between the Christians and the Muslims, which resulted in the latter's transfer and permanent exclusion from the Zone. The Muslims had lost their faith in Nay-toe, who had stood by and done nothing as the Christian forces went from home to home searching for young men to kill and young women to abduct. The shop-keep showed the long scar encircling his head. He explained that within this camp, a communal decision to respect all religions is enforced through threat of expulsion. The needs of commerce, he admitted, were not matters of GOD. He himself



travels often from Turkey, paying off cargo ships to traffic goods through the Black Sea into the Zone. His Russian was perfect, fluid and rhythmically pleasing which made Yelena feel like a shoddy knock-off besides genuine Nike. While Yelena imagined piercing the skies above her like a burning rocket, Elon Rao had already lived & died for twenty lifetimes. Now he knew the other side-- gotta be so good that he never returned. She reckons, a few decades of boredom is a small price to pay for paradise.

And the first thought went on:

« Boredom thus became the disease which plagued only ‘monzhj,’ and none other of Nay-toe’s creatures... but this was no divine punishment. It was a mundane and earthly one. So to distract himself from boredom, ‘monzhj’ begun to tell himself lies about his desires, inclinations, tendencies, and wants. And thus, love between the first ‘monzhj’ and the first ‘zenzhj’ was born. And they together became the first ‘druzhina,’ or those who do Nay-toe’s will without even realizing it. So far, so good. »

Yelena found Natalia overlooking several carpets adorned with phones: from little ancien régime Nokias to Galápagos clam shells, littered amongst fractured smartphones and forgotten portables. Hanging from a few fish hooks



were phones abuzz with monophonic ring-tones, falling in concert together like a forest with birds, filling the air with shrill chirps and trills; these were the chimes of the Zone, catching Nay-toe's stark winds and the last of the MIDI howls before that old world crumbles into disrepair. Yelena crouched down to look at a smartphone with a peculiar crack in the bottom of its screen; she'd remembered it had fallen from its perch onto the floor, while Christine posed with her freshly-oiled gun. Christine yelled a few curse words as she reached for it, then threw the phone back onto the floor once more as a punishment. Yelena picked up the smartphone, turning it around to find a sticker saying "bitch-made," another of a fried egg, and a few more from clubs around the world meant to obscure the camera. From the bottom, there hung a jagged plastic fragment of the green-haired 'n horned anime girl now missing her lower body. Yelena turned the phone around again, twice more; she yelped with recognition, relief, as if her entire life had regained its sharp purpose and function... a dull and rusty knife taken from its drawer and sharpened once more. She held down the square button but nothing awoke, the phone remained stoic and dark.

Natalia watched Yelena nervously chew her fingers as she studied the phone. A vulnerable chill washed over her; is



this what this stupid foreigner was here for? Blood will spill from the wells merely for this little box of broken glass and plastic-- ah, but how could Yelena explain it? How could she say that Natalia is merely blind, that she sees only the world before her... and not the thousands which laid beyond the screen, melting into the infinite horizon. Yes; it's surely there where Nay-toe lived... in that world of infinite desires and emptiness, of which this phone was merely a sacrament, a tool permitting a higher order of experience and consciousness. How could I explain it to you? The borders and meanings of flesh and blood melt away in the flood, and the boundaries of Ego overlap with its desires. Sell away that island of self 'cuz only the formless, shapeless, may survive nothingness. How could I explain it to you? You, for whom the demands of the physical and the death it invites are your only guiding star.

Yelena offered the man behind the carpet her keys to the truck, begging him to take it. Natalia shook Yelena's arm in protest, her face sullen as the claustrium of these cardboard walls and its voices hung over her like vultures. To trade the freedom of the open road, the singular chance at even another hour of life, for a broken telephone seemed like madness to her. "The truck's leaking! It's not use to us. It's no use to me. I need this. This is what I came for!"



Yelena yelped, forgetting in her agitation that she could not be understood. Natalia formed a point with her fingers and stuck it into Yelena's ribs. "Boljne!" she yelped. Yelena shoved Natalia, with enough force to send her tumbling down onto the dusty ground. All the protest fled from Natalia's body, like wind escaping a balloon, and she felt her own arms and legs grow heavy and slack. Yelena howled with sudden concern, "poryadke?" She reached down to hold Natalia's light body in her arms, and though she felt Natalia's heart thump heavily and saw Natalia's eyes shake with burdensome tears, a powerful panic started to drag on every pained breath. "Shto sluchilesj? Natalia?" She took Natalia in her arms and looked at the man behind the carpet, who'd jumped onto his feet and gestured wildly with fingers and points. "Klinika," he yelled. "Klinika," he pointed down the street. Natalia uttered pained babbles, pulling on Yelena's shirt, unable to tell her that nothing at all was wrong. While Yelena ran down the street, shouting "klinika? Gde? Mnye nade v kliniku," Natalia thought of every muscle in her body, trying to conjure up any resistance that would stiffen the fingers or steady the limbs-- and thereby face the tides of nervous lethargy, the restless tiredness. But what good was resistance? To put off the inevitable, just to see another loathsome morning sun rise from the still black of the night sky? To delay the rot?



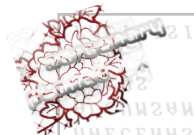


To greedily trade oneself and her everything for another day of tasteless food and song? No. This was her protest. Against protest. Only yebanaya mudachka would sit in a river, her arms facing the waves, and command them to stop.



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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

POI datafile

Name: Mai Obiakolam

Sex: female (by choice)

Occupation: musician (Patron)

Blood type: a

Likes: the night sky, speculative physics, jazz, funk, lo-fi, chiptune, early modernism, weird tonal systems, pastel-neon colour combinations, marijuana, DXM, psychedelics, binaural beats, fairy kei, 70s UFO mysticism, J-pastries, alternative idols, aquariums, free association (all meanings)

Dislikes: shock videos, mean-spirited shitposting, white pop culture canon, trivial callouts, people who ask her to do an OnlyFans, the segregation of queer spaces, 99% of hentai, Lolita forum drama, indoor heat

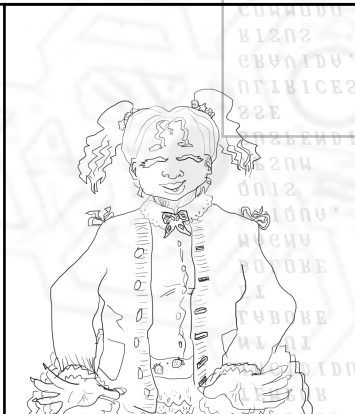
Theme song: Ah-Mer-Ah-Su - Be Free

Discography: Zaxxor - Zerg Beat

Zaxxor - Afro Etudes

Xilla - Fibonacci

Xilla - Mirror Neurons



Yung Charles Wallace (& Magical Meg) - Public Library
EP (deleted)

Zaxxor - NDFE: Not Dead Fuck Everyone

Xilla - The Tournament Arc Years (competition collection
- fundraiser)

Xilla & Xiaox - DNA Fossil EP (fundraiser - deleted)

Xilla & Xiaox - The Long-Awaited Album (deleted)

Sleep Prophet - Laser Visions

Mai Starchyyld - The Metaculture Mysteries (EP)

Mai Starchyyld - Nebula Womb

Mai Starchyyld - Queerz Bop 1 (covers collection)

Mai Starchyyld - Amphisboena

Mai Starchyyld - Queerz Bop 2: The Loosies

Mai Starchyyld - Queerz Bop 3: I Need Money





I can't overemphasize the importance of this file; Obiakolam is probably the single most important asset to controlling Person of Interest Lillywhite, and also the most dangerous, unpredictable influence on her. Any overly heavy-handed approaches to using her are likely to backfire explosively. Obiakolam's mother, a light skinned African American who grew up in a housing project in one of the gang heartlands of Chicago, both alienated and fetishized by the culture around her (reputedly the "Helen" of a minor gangland Iliad when she was 13) ran away from home and married Jerome Obiakolam, an Evangelical Christian serial entrepreneur recently immigrated from Nigeria, as soon as she graduated high school (it's not clear how much earlier they had been talking to each other). They bounced between cities for several years before settling in Seattle in time to raise their first child. Since settling Jerome Obiakolam has steadily grown a house cleaning business that operates a bit like a pyramid scheme, and is now a recognizable institution of the city's black neighbourhoods. Her school records (as "Max") suggest an

imaginative, enthusiastic learner who had few friends but attached herself to teachers as surrogate parents and took any excuse to spend time away from home. She was tested for giftedness several times but apparently had a tendency to shut down completely at tests. We don't entirely have to rely on secondary sources like this to understand her childhood; unlike the Lillywhites who have completely stonewalled us, both of her parents have been exceptionally open to our investigations. "I should never have let in that Sailor Moon show," Jerome told our agent at a bar. "It only took one episode, I turned it off before the credits, one episode, for the subliminal witchcraft to completely rewrite his brain! Does he still wear his hair like that?" Even before the exposure to Sailor Moon, however, Jerome suspected something was wrong with his child. "The first time he started talking in a language I had never heard, and he had just barely started learning English and Igbo, I was overjoyed, I thought, he is speaking in tongues! So I took him to the preacher, and then he started talking about who taught him this language, the... creatures



he would draw, that didn't look like anything, just colours and shapes, but had names. And the preacher was afraid! He tried to exorcise him then and there! But my stupid wife said, this is just what children do, they make up stories. And I would say, children should not make up stories, they will start to tell lies next! The teachers said he was smart so I would give him lots of tutoring and workbooks but he would scribble things on them, and when my wife bought him his first computer...!" Her mother, for her part, blames trauma rather than demons. "I believe in demons. I have seen them, in my own husband. But the house my son grew up in made him not want to live around humans. Jerome doesn't remember this but such a big part of everything he talked about was the peacefulness, the nonviolence, and he was getting his ass whooped for crying before he could talk, and would come home to see me getting my ass whooped for cooking a jollof the wrong way... The thing that's hard to understand when you're that young is that Jerome wasn't bad. He doesn't do those things because he wants to, but because he believes in







it, and back then I thought I would endure anything from a man who is trying to do what's right over a man who doesn't care about it at all. Eventually I learned this was wrong and we resolved things with the help of our pastor, but I still feel that way sometimes, because what if it wasn't his father and was something I did that made him turn out this way? All I can only know is what I believe, and that I'm trying to do what's right."

Mai's natural artistic inclinations seem to incorporate every medium; drawing was one of the most important at a young age, as was writing, though her impulses in both of these areas were poorly understood even by sympathetic teachers; she responded poorly to attempts to focus them into an academically recognizable discipline, and seemed to partly believe her father's account of them as a form of demonic possession, which she would arguably later reframe into the core of her personal mythology. Music only became a possibility after she obtained her first laptop at the start of middle school; her parents originally refused to allow



an internet connection and so instead she explored every preset program, quickly falling in love with GarageBand. As soon as she had that outlet, she mostly stopped drawing and writing on her assignments and started doing better in school; her few drawings from this time, around middle school, however, started to take on a more realistic character, featuring an alter ego of herself as a girl. “He told me this was his girlfriend, when I saw her,” Jerome told us. “And I would say, bring her home, so we can find out if she’s good for you! Then one day at a parent teacher conference I asked the teacher to point me out in the yearbook Max’s girlfriend, and she said, Max has no girlfriend. And then I found out what was happening to him.” Mai meanwhile had also found an outlet for her imagination outside of her parents’ supervision by joining her joint middle-high school’s anime club, and started sneaking her laptop into school where her new friends taught her how to get around parental filters and use a proxy. Her first exposure to the concept of transsexuality was Ruka in Steins;Gate. When she started posting her mu-






music online she had barely listened to anything besides her father's Afrobeat records and anime soundtracks; yet despite the distinctly Fela-ish theme-and-variations structure of her early compositions, she had managed to intuitively reinvent the basics of chiptune by messing around in presets

Her first friend she was willing to share her music with (Alex Jankowski, now a famous femboy cosplayer, estranged) told her as much and soon got her entering chiptune competitions, while she explored the wider world of music with a passion that eclipsed her interest in anime: jazz fusion, Chicago house, avant-garde electronics, indie, prog, funk. Her discovery of Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane (hundreds of hours of scrobbles respectively logged on Last.fm) may have been a turning point leading to the development of her mature persona - and Nina Simone, as she has mentioned in several interviews, gave her a core of comfort with her voice, though she would still not attempt singing until she transitioned. Her earliest online profiles were carefully


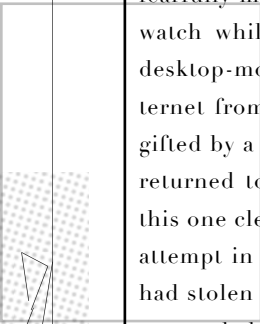
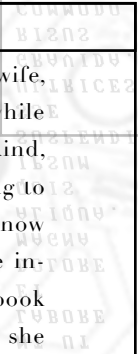
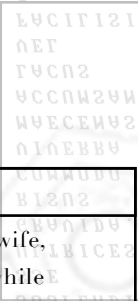

degendered, as well as deracialized (see Appendix A).

The break leading to Mai's transition and self-mythologization, however, was her first suicide attempt, in Grade 10. It is unclear even from our conversations with her parents what was happening inside the Obiakolam household at this point, but her mother had just begun standing up to her father, who probably responded by taking more of his anger out on her; he had been micromanaging her appearance to make her more masculine, forbidding her from shaving and enforcing dubious diets to make her lose weight; and using a matchmaker to set her up with Christian girls, one of whom, according to a rejected application she made to a domestic violence shelter a year later, attempted to rape her, claiming her father's explicit permission. (Mai was not even unattracted to girls, but uncomfortable with the dominant role expected of her; after this experience she became equally uncomfortable with the submissive role.) When she resisted and fled the house she was accused by the girl's parents of assaulting her, and shamed publicly in the church. Within a day she had

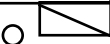



locked herself in the bathroom, slit her wrists with her father's straight razor, and survived only because she passed out midway through making her cut. She spent a month in a mental hospital, in which she was diagnosed with schizotypal personality disorder, manic depression and borderline personality disorder - gender dysphoria not once mentioned. "After this I stopped loving him," Jerome tells us chillingly. "How could I? He had responded to my attempt to discipline and redirect him, to save him, by bringing shame on me. It was a declaration of war - and unlike him, I am a man, when I make war, I mean war." By this, reports from guidance counsellors suggest that Jerome Obiakolam's "discipline" went far beyond the Biblical "rule of thumb".

Mai's fictionalized self-perception has called her accounts into question the few times she has made them publicly - her KiwiFarms thread describes them as "a tragic Mary Sue backstory" - but in our conversations Jerome casually admitted to making use of many of the same professional torture methods as our own interro-













gators. He now hid much of this abuse from his wife, attempting to present himself as a changed man, while she in turn, became a tormentor of a different kind, fearfully monitoring Mai to the point of demanding to watch while she showered. Mai's computer was now desktop-monitored, and she could only access the internet from school computers, including a Powerbook gifted by a sympathetic guidance counsellor. When she returned to the internet it was under a new persona, this one clearly presented as female. She made another attempt in a school bathroom, overdosing on pills she had stolen from the locker of the local dealer, who was suspended in the aftermath, and her behaviour began to distance her from her anime club friends. Her grades slipped - attempts to prepare her for college or a career were futile: her parents had told her she would not be permitted to graduate or leave the house until she was "healthy" or dead. A chiptune forum owner she finally confided in helped her set up her first bank account in secret, set up a Patreon, and gradually accumulate money through fundraisers, some explicitly attached



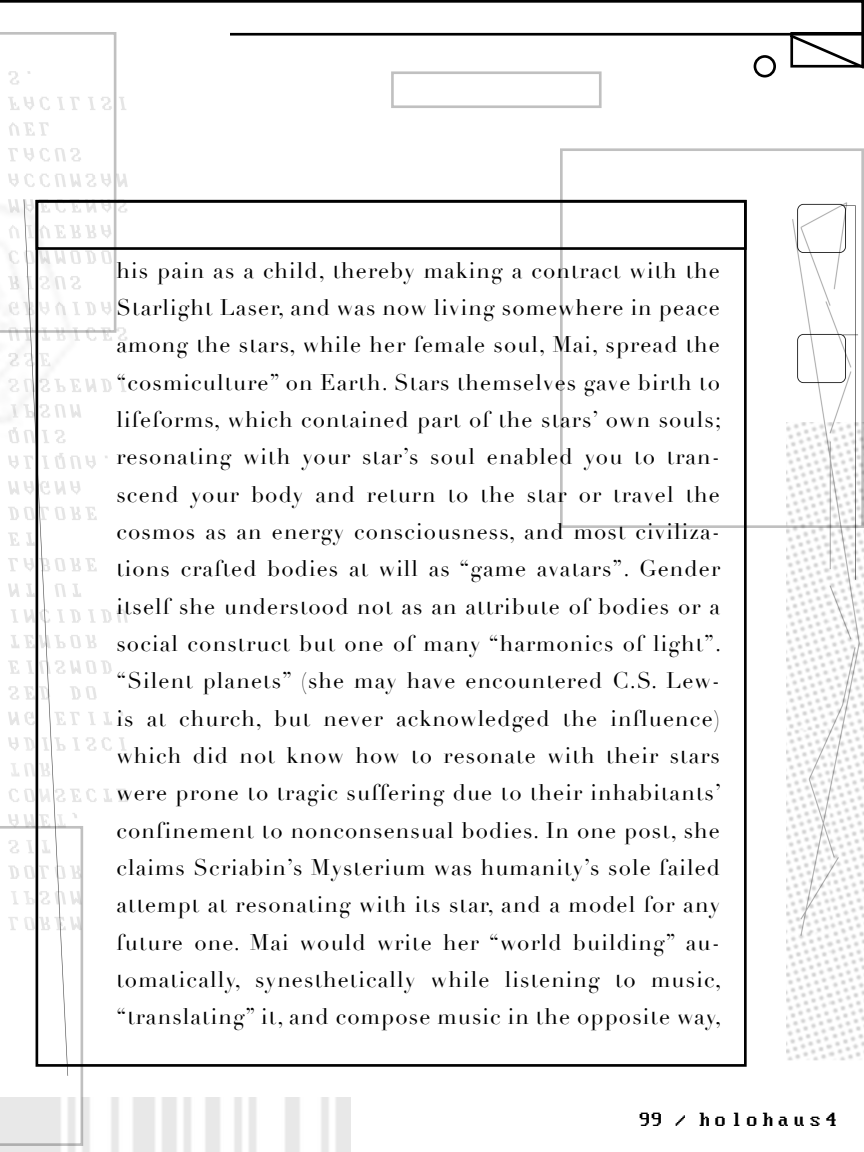
to her name, others not. Four months before she was scheduled to graduate, she ran away from home. Multiple people from the forum had reached out to host her, but the forum owner insisted that she not accept any offers from a strange adult until she turned 18 and instead spent her first several months in a youth shelter.

Her parents called up and visited every shelter in the city, however, and after several close calls she ran and took up the offer of another forum user, Xiaox, who had been her “rival” in the contests. Her experience was as bad as the owner had feared; 24-year-old Xiaox had sexualized their relationship in his head, assumed she was a cis woman, and didn’t understand that being a trans woman didn’t make her interested in men. Xiaox took no for an answer when it came to actual sex, but still insisted on showing her erotic fiction about the two of them and romantically-tinged collaborations (we know this primarily from a callout post Leona eventually persuaded her to write); she nonetheless put up with him for almost two years, surviving on his income as a tech



support manager which gave her almost uninterrupted time at home to craft her musical style and persona.

There is far too much “Mai Starchyld” lore to summarize here, though an attempt is made in Appendix C. The statements about herself, the universe and its inhabitants scattered across the blurbs and lyrics of her hundreds of songs, interviews, account descriptions, blog posts, microfictions and hidden webpages connect in the sense of a massive ARG, though they are not meant to be followed in any particular game-order or lead to a hidden goal; they are simply the world she convinced herself, to the most genuine extent not diagnosable as psychotic, she was living in, at least whenever she made art or presented herself publicly. Like Mab, she understood her gender dysphoria supernaturally, as an alien soul inhabiting her projected by “starlight laser”, the main cosmic communication network, which sought out new worlds like our SETI transmissions except transmitting entire souls (note the analogy to Scientology Thetans) as probes. Her “human” soul as Max had prayed to be released from

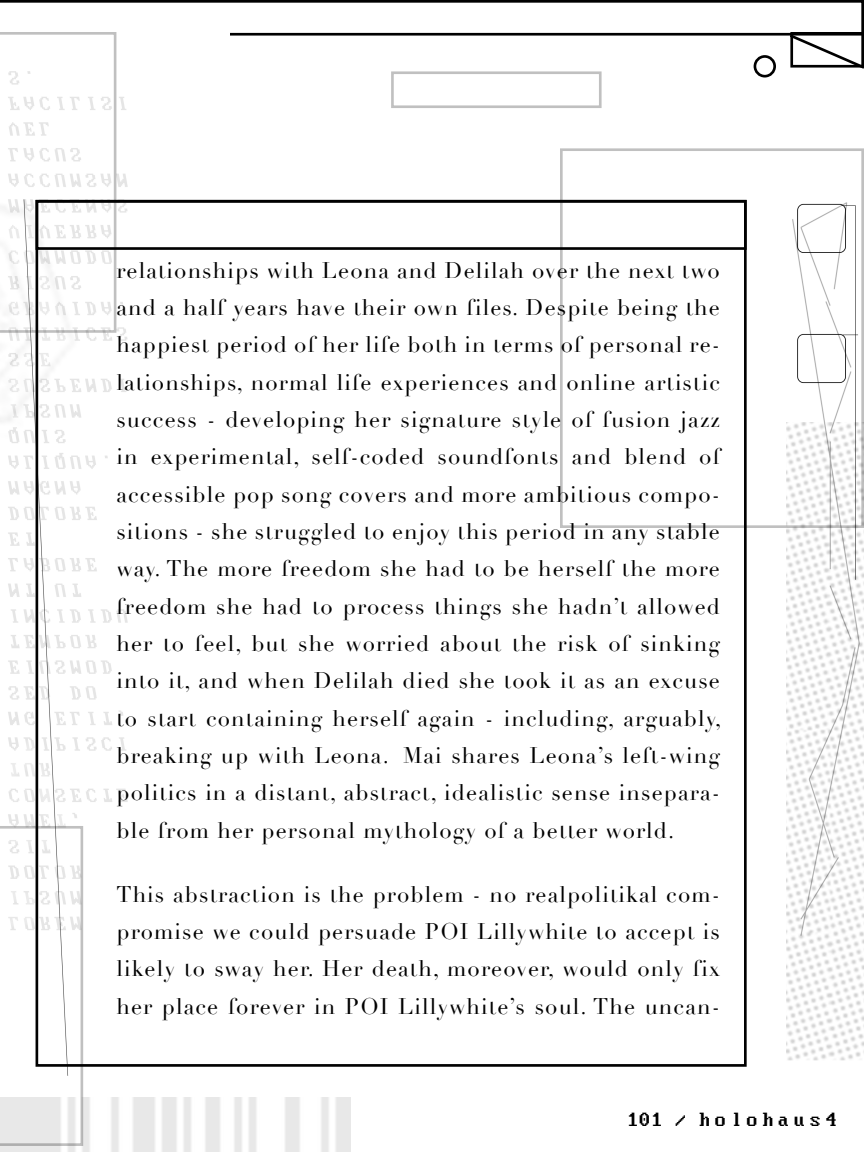


his pain as a child, thereby making a contract with the Starlight Laser, and was now living somewhere in peace among the stars, while her female soul, Mai, spread the “cosmiculture” on Earth. Stars themselves gave birth to lifeforms, which contained part of the stars’ own souls; resonating with your star’s soul enabled you to transcend your body and return to the star or travel the cosmos as an energy consciousness, and most civilizations crafted bodies at will as “game avatars”. Gender itself she understood not as an attribute of bodies or a social construct but one of many “harmonics of light”. “Silent planets” (she may have encountered C.S. Lewis at church, but never acknowledged the influence) which did not know how to resonate with their stars were prone to tragic suffering due to their inhabitants’ confinement to nonconsensual bodies. In one post, she claims Scriabin’s *Mysterium* was humanity’s sole failed attempt at resonating with its star, and a model for any future one. Mai would write her “world building” automatically, synesthetically while listening to music, “translating” it, and compose music in the opposite way,



often writing out a description of part of her universe and attempting to “translate” it back to music.

The musical style she developed by doing this was a combination of jazz fusion and bedroom pop, gradually replacing simple chiptune soundfonts with bizarre, alien-sounding ones she designed herself. Xiaox lived in the suburbs well outside Seattle, another reason she chose him to avoid her parents; as her music started picking up popularity, Mai began to venture into the downtown again to perform. She had also been working on coordinating women’s clothing and makeup, which Xiaox was particularly picky about (and she was in her own way), and could by now pass fairly well even without being on hormones. On her third concert, marking the release of her first complete album in her mature style, *Nebula Womb*, she was invited to a trans group house which included Delilah Pankhurst and a member of the Cult of Black Domnu, and ran away without a word to her former host. A brief attempt to recruit her to the cult bounced completely off her own idiosyncratic worldview and introduced her to Leona. Her



relationships with Leona and Delilah over the next two and a half years have their own files. Despite being the happiest period of her life both in terms of personal relationships, normal life experiences and online artistic success - developing her signature style of fusion jazz in experimental, self-coded soundfonts and blend of accessible pop song covers and more ambitious compositions - she struggled to enjoy this period in any stable way. The more freedom she had to be herself the more freedom she had to process things she hadn't allowed her to feel, but she worried about the risk of sinking into it, and when Delilah died she took it as an excuse to start containing herself again - including, arguably, breaking up with Leona. Mai shares Leona's left-wing politics in a distant, abstract, idealistic sense inseparable from her personal mythology of a better world.

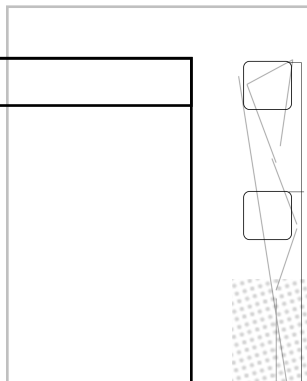
This abstraction is the problem - no realpolitikal compromise we could persuade POI Lillywhite to accept is likely to sway her. Her death, moreover, would only fix her place forever in POI Lillywhite's soul. The uncanny

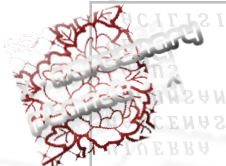


ny proximity of that mythology to the world POI Lilly-white has discovered - a world that seems substantially closer to hers than ours in terms of scarcity, militarization, political structure and bewildering diversity, with the exception of being at war - gives us a rare opportunity to neutralize the threat she poses by breaking her.

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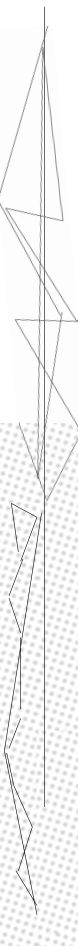


Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

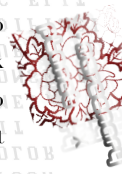
Last Time

leona-halation, jax and alastair secure materials to maintain halation's vitals from a local drug dealer only for the organization known only as edison lens to apprehend them. in a makeshift interrogation room, leona and halation negotiate for their lives and the future of the earth



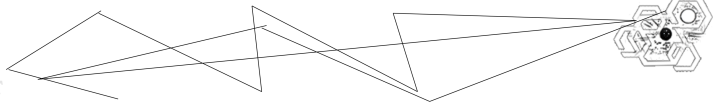
CW: transphobic slurs, trans chaser, war crimes, Yugoslav civil war, Syrian civil war, homophobic slurs, kissing, OCD thought patterns, grief, suicidal ideation, gender self-invalidation, police, forcible mental health intervention, racialized danger, psychedelics, evacuation, conspiracy theories, heavy weaponry

“Marriage Lessons From Former Navy SEAL Waldo Beek.” “Waldo Beek On Why He Regrets Taking Part In Operation Snakebite.” “Waldo Beek Speaks On What Kosovo Taught Him About Leadership And Life.” “Waldo Beek Teaches You How To Apply NATO Special Ops Training To Your Business.” “Waldo Beek On Why The Future Doesn’t Worry Him.” “What Waldo Beek REFUSED To Do In Haiti - CENSORED ON ALL MAJOR PLATFORMS.” “Waldo Beek: How To Protect YOUR 401K From China’s Geostrategic Interests.” “Waldo Beek Breaks Down What’s Wrong With Today’s Generals (Top Secret Military Personality Science Revealed).” “Waldo Beek Responds To Leaked



CONSCIENCE & COMPETENCE

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Military Climate Change Documents.”

Video taglines - from the most mind-numbing time I ever wasted, hours cast irrecoverably into the shit-caked dumpster of anhedonic despair that consumed my early 20s, serving no purpose but to reinforce my contempt for what this country did with its money - scrolled across my mind's eye as I tried not to gape at the face crinkling at me across the helipad. It could have been a greeting or it could have just been the sun in his eyes.

One time on Tumblr I'd gotten ten thousand notes for saying Waldo Beek looked like someone fed John Kricfalusi's George Liquor into Midjourney, but seeing him in person I realized it didn't do him justice. Rather than the cartoon alcoholic's red face, Beek's skin was beaten bleached leather, as if built up entirely from stacked knots of scar tissue. X ray it all you want and you'd find nothing but gaps where anonymous corpses are buried and mothers spend long nights looking up at ceilings that have become unfamiliar, wondering if their children will again ever grace their kitchens with indulgent laughter. He had the same crew cut, but both wispy-thin and uncannily even, so that the dome of his head was perfectly visible through it (the only place his skin showed any reddishness was





a shiny raw spot near the back of his skull that marked where it'd cave if you swung a steel bat against it). And while his face was stuck on the same smirk hoisted by the corners like a hammock from unnaturally clenched cheek muscles, his eyes were not round and wide but laugh-lined almost shut, upturned crescent arrowslits behind which it wasn't hard to imagine shrieking, swallowing quasars.

"This is"- I glanced back at Caroline Bennett-Fog, hoping there'd been some mistake, like we'd been waiting for somebody else and instead he'd just crashed the helipad to do a video, but she was holding back snickers as visibly as hiccups.

He had a full SEAL uniform on and all his medals - some of which I didn't recognize - which I also remembered he made a point of not wearing for mere commercial content.

For what it's worth he looked just as confused as me. He shuffled halfway across the helipad and looked me up and down in a way he seemed to be trying to disguise as the minute movements of his folded facial muscles but was already apparent from his intent stillness. Bennett-Fog pressed into my shoulder from behind and, from a vantage point where I couldn't read her face, introduced me: "This is Leona - Commander Lillywhite. And, well, we call them



Halation.”

“And this is...” I began, pretending not to recognize the man now stepping closer forward .

“Come on. You know I have your posts about this guy in my file, right?”

“And you thought we would get along because...”

“M-ma’am, it’s clear you’re not my normal type of person nor I yours but if you can be open-minded I can. You know I frequented quite a few trannies myself in Kosovo,” he laughed, mouth cracking open like a crocodile’s, “but they were... tall golden ladies, golden skin, golden hair, a-quiline features. Aquiline! Means like an eagle. I suppose that means, they were eagles, you’re a lion! But you look more like a kid I used to buy pot from, so that’ll make things friendly.”

My eyes narrowed. “I edited Waldo Beek Transphobia Compilation #5.”

No I didn’t, Sophie did, but it sounded like a snappy line. He busted a gut, big burping guffaws.

“So you’re a fan!”





Then he snapped his head back from its laughing recline and fixed me with an eye contact that came as a total jarring shock after having gotten used to not registering his eyes at all.

And I saw why in all his speeches for business clubs and government agencies, and Youtube and Rumble and Fox News and Fox Business and subscriber-only video, Waldo Beek used his grooved, hypermobile face to hide his eyes.

His self-parodying Foghorn Leghorn persona - Bennett-Fog had referred to him, when she woke me up from a half-sleep half-planning exhausted trance state and told me who I was going to meet, as “Jester” - would have been deflated in an instant by those reptilian awls.

“I’m sorry, that’s probably not a way to speak to... a commanding officer. Although I suppose I haven’t been recruited yet. Not by you, if you’re supposed to be doing any recruiting. I’ve been hired by them, and their forces are apparently under your command. But I prefer, when I can get it, honest military organization to commercial arrangements.”

“What has he been hired to do? Shoot PR?”



"Shoot people. Or, I guess, aliens. And tell you where to point people to shoot them. Because you've never done it before."

"We discussed this, remember." Caroline crept around my shoulder now. "You yourself requested - people who can."

"I thought you'd get me like a real general or something. Somebody I'd never heard of. Quiet expert."

"You see, there are certain limitations we face in this respect," Bennett-Fog began softly. "If nations commit forces to the IIEF" - International Interstellar Expeditionary Force: the acronym had changed three times this week - "presumably they'll bring along some of their top brass. But at the moment, we need someone directly under you, advising you personally - who would have more say over the core priorities of the mission than any of them - and if any of the other countries are going to sign on, it can't be one of their rivals. We need precisely someone not currently affiliated with any national military."

Waldo Beek, a NATO commander in Kosovo, celebrated by military strategy nerds and accused in several highbrow investigative exposes of war crimes, had been honourably discharged right before a threatened investigation and





since opened up a “strategic consultancy” (mercenary outfit) that had spent the past two decades doing little verifiable in, but producing lots of obviously inflated content about, various anti-terrorism operations across the Middle East. I knew about him because he even at one point had his own name-branded shooter game, which was essentially a bad Counterstrike mod that now filled half of giant cardboard sale boxes in already-going-out-of-business game shops. He was a rah-rah American patriot, but the kind who said the Iraq War was a mistake, and featured a sheepish John Mearsheimer on his podcast, and argued that dangerous areas of the world should be partitioned between “legitimate strategic interests” and policed by mercenaries such as himself. I had once chased out some embarrassing elements of the student left that were into him.

“Waldo Beek is not only formally unaffiliated with any of them, but in regular and trusted contact with the national militaries of every major superpower. Another problem is the kind of war we’re going to be fighting out there, we don’t have many people who have fought. Institutional legitimacy is going to be worth as much as officer school in World War 1. This guy... has at least seen a lot of different situations.”



"It's not going to be standing around checkpoints in Fal-lujah either."

"So you're not a big enough fan to know what I was doing in Syria."

"Bellingcat debunked that you were even in Syria."

"Of course they did, that's what they're there for."

I looked back at Caroline, more deliberately. She nodded, smiling with gentle sadism.

Of all the paranoid things to be right! Of course, that one hadn't even occurred to me because the story Bellingcat debunked had been perceived on my side of the internet as a pro-NATO one - it claimed Beek's "Nimrod Operational Solutions" was doing missions for Russia. Either that was a limited hangout, or the full extent of Beek's operations had been approved and covered up with a high degree of international cooperation.

A degree of international cooperation that would bely part of the explanation of why he was here in the first place, so I still wasn't being given the whole picture, one way or another.





"In this case, I understand if you don't want to consider yourself my commanding officer, per se, and all considered that probably works out better for all of us. There are things it's better to go through your life without doing, and I'm very good at them."

"Everyone should point a gun at someone once in their life to experience their human dignity'. That was you, right?" I folded my arms.

He chortled, eyes completely concealed again. "Of course! The things I'm talking about aren't just pointing a gun at someone. If you want to volunteer on the front lines feel free - as long as you let someone else talk to that alien if you die."

Edison Lens had talked us into agreeing to pass Halation on to a successor, but I wasn't saying who to soften the inevitability that they would try to influence them - although they knew everything about me, and so had to know there were only three or so people I would trust with the responsibility, and at least one of those I didn't know if I could bring myself to. They might not guess the couple of distant internet senpais I was considering might do the job better than me. My major leverage, in any case, was Halation's equally firm commitment to back out of any transfer, even



at the cost of the war effort, if they detected the successor had been coerced in any way, or even that their values had substantially diverged from my model of them.

Once we were in a war, I asked in our late night planning sessions, were you sure you would be able to commit to those priorities. To lose. If lives were at stake.

They couldn't say for sure. But if they weren't sure, I wasn't sure with them.

I don't mean that in terms of some mindmeld self-confusion. I meant that in terms of sincere respect for their decision, their values.

The more I lived with them the more they struck me as a better person than almost anyone I had ever met on Earth, except for maybe Delilah and Mai, which embarrassed them because they didn't even think of themselves as an especially good alien. They had treated the project they had survived mostly as an excuse to play number games, and had outlived researchers who would have suffered unimaginably for peace. But to me, they had just grown up on a better world, and it showed. If they were willing, as someone who thought like that, to risk introducing that world to capitalism and white supremacy for the advantage



of time and lives, maybe I really just wasn't serious enough about war.

Part of me wondered whether Contemplation would even make the same mistakes as the millennia of other humans who had fallen prey to the ambitions of people like Beek. But as so much of the colonization of this continent proved, the most vulnerable time for a civilization is when it's at war and needs allies - and from everything Halation had showed me, war out there was no better than war here.

Maybe even, because they weren't used to it, worse.

Halation understood that this was a weakness they would have to guard against in themselves, that I knew better than they did, and I didn't know how not to trust them, but they trusted me to.

Of course, I barely knew it at all. Secretly, absurdly, I had hoped for a general who would know better than me how to fight a war without it eating your soul. Maybe from a developing country, a sober and reluctant bulwark against American imperialism. Caroline was right that my kind of people didn't know war - and as soon as the risk of life and death became real to us, even in our personal lives, we tended to throw all our high-mindedness and restraint out



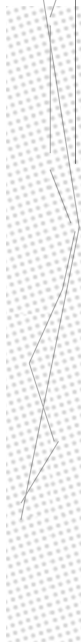
the window. I had seen it. I had lived it.

“Anyway, there’s things we have to talk about if I’m going to need your approval to move on them,” Beek informed me, “so let’s get the introductions over quick. You means uh-hh, Halation? too.”

Those things were apparently now visible in the upper stratosphere. Google and NASA had blacked a square out of all publicly available sky maps.

Halation’s own ship had, it turned out, only been discovered because a probe on the moon had picked up the three much larger bodies following it, with telemetric precision that had allowed them to predict Halation’s almost exact trajectory towards Earth. On the more powerful telescopes we had trained on them now, they looked somewhat like anomalocaris, and measured close to 700 metres in length.

When I made the comparison in my head, Halation informed me that there was something like that in the sea trenches of Orchid too. “Anomalocarization”, like carcinization, was something that happened in the first large stages of an ecosystem across the galaxy. Probability theory-specialized lifeforms had a deep explanation of it that took a CPU the size of Pluto to understand. Unlike our



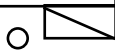


anomalocarids, these had three appendages at the front of their body, left, right and centre. Each one was about the size of its main body, and the appendages themselves were not only segmented but fanned like the main body of an Earth anomalocarid, curling feathers made of armour plates (each one a subtly different shade, though mostly in the range of deep rippling reds, blues and purples). The back body, on the other hand, had a row of short tentacles or pseudopods on each side. (These were paler than the armour segments.)

Halation called them, simply, Clamps.

“I’ve been watching those things for the past three days.” Beek was no longer smiling, not only for the first time since I’d seen him, but the first time I could pull out of my hazy, mostly suppressed memory of his videos. “Space Force brought me in for a strategy exercise before they even remembered you guys existed. Hosted by a goddamn science fiction writer. You know what we did? We played GURPS. Unknowns are one thing, but that just isn’t how a man like me operates. But I hear you can tell me what those are, what they’re gonna do when they get here, and what we can do to them.”

“They don’t even have to get here. I’ve been trying to tell



them this. There's a fairly easy way to divert them with a laser that interferes in their targeting system."

"Right. But what's been discussed with me is... well, think about this for a minute. You want to send a brand new army - and this'll have to be a big army, bigger than we've mustered since the world wars possibly - to space, to fight a war for aliens. Under the command of an organization nobody except some of my nuttier subscribers has ever heard of, and you, someone nobody has. You know me, I'm down for anything, but most people, the President, the President of Russia, of China, are going to take some convincing."

"That's why were going to introduce the technologies. The Limited Asymmetry Field. I've been talking to the scientists here, sketching out applications for power, transit, communications, medicine..." weapons. Over and over again, they brought it back to weapons.

"If somebody told you your iPhone was made by aliens, would you believe them? Would you go to war for them? Maybe if the aliens showed up, talked to you - but you're not letting anyone else talk to this one."

"I've been willing to do video, genetic samples, controlled





mental contact, every kind of proof and documentation.” My voice was getting heated now, and I struggled at once to prevent it from cracking and dipping into gravelly depth. It wasn’t that I wasn’t prepared for my proposals to be unconvincing. I spent almost every waking minute perfecting them - they had given me a little office, with a window on the sea and a digital whiteboard and deep work subliminal meditation tapes and a computer with access to the classified internal networks of several major governments and corporations, and a copy of Clausewitz I had been working through at about 50 pages a day, sitting right next to my keyboard - and at night in my cot, I didn’t exactly sleep the way I used to either, my dreams were lucid, training simulations - but I missed so many things, had to go back to the drawing board, disappointed them and myself so often - if nothing else I knew how easy it was to be wrong. But no one around me had suggested anything was off. They had all collaborated enthusiastically on the plans the man they had hired was now dismissing, and Caroline hiding a knowing smirk in my peripheral vision.

“There’s a simpler way to convince people. Let those things land. Blow them to hell. Say we could be invaded any minute by more, by things worse than that, but we have powerful allies, and we’re safer fighting out there



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than down here. Of course, that's assuming we can blow them to hell. That's what I need you to walk me through."

"Is this... is this what you've all been... assuming we'd do? Just risk lives down here - for optics?"

"We're risking lives down here by getting into an alien war, period. Risking all the lives down here. Better get used to it now."

"NASA's not willing to let us use their lasers," Caroline placed her final piece coolly. I still had no way of knowing if that was true or not (I would need contacts of my own in all those organizations, but I couldn't until I had my own army) and she knew it. "They might not trust you. But everyone's willing to lend us bombs, tanks, planes, guns, men if those things land. Or rather, they won't have to - they've all got their own wargames and plans but they have no idea what they're doing. If we give them a plan that works they'll go along with it, while retaining command in theory, and we can show that what we do works."

"Tell me the minimum death toll," Beek looked up at me with bittersweet Santa Claus eyes, "between them landing and us killing them, and I will do everything in my power to allow no more than that."





I gulped. “Uhh, theoretically zero. It’s the maximum I’m worried about.” I let Halation quietly take over. “The Clamps - that’s the closest thing in your language to what we call them - aren’t enemy combatants. They’re parasites. They’re not complex in what they do or what they want. They live off heat waste and... informational entropy? not sure if you have the same concept yet but some of the tech people here were getting it - from complex information systems. Normally they live on computational life, and some of the enemy factions use them as spies or like, glorified USB sticks to carry viruses to targets. They wouldn’t have anything that would affect your confusing programming languages, though. So the point is, they don’t have any interest in harming any lifeforms on this planet. But as soon as they land and their field kicks in, anything electric’s probably going out in a 30-mile radius. Computational life out there runs way hotter than a city here; they probably won’t be able to get a consistent food supply until they inject their code into our systems. Then we’ll have the opposite problem.”

“Their... code? Hey let’s go somewhere on this floater, before my feet start to get hot standing on this asphalt.”

I turned without a word towards the ladder down from



the helipad onto the sleek white surface (flat walkway and fluted, car-hood edges) of the main horseshoe of Plastic Beach, entrepreneur Hiram Ogier's seastead campus just outside the California Coastal Zone, and current headquarters of Edison Lens. The horseshoe wrapped around the huge frame of the transmission tower complex, which also included a world-class telescope, a gigantic solar dish and a small SETI-style receiver array. At one end was canteen, bar, diving boards, umbrellas still folded up from heavy misty winds half an hour ago with no one up here still. The walkway was also dotted every ten metres or so with white plastic minibars and white metal benches.

"Yeah. They're parasites on computational life so they have like... code that partitions off a virtual machine and just runs arbitrary calculations, sorta like mining bitcoin, to feed them without interfering in any of the actually important programs. It does symbiotic things on some of them too, like routine code-checking stuff, but nothing that'll be useful to anyone here." I turned but looked down at my feet, avoiding the canals of Beek's now backlit face as I steadied myself on the rungs, and as a possibility so alarming and exciting I had to keep it to myself came to mind.





“Do they need to eat anything to keep the physical bodies alive?”

“Besides heat and energy? ...nothing we need to be worried about in the near term. Those things are built from an extremely low energy state of matter, they're built to last thousands of years out in space with minimal upkeep.”

“What does that mean for conventional weapons?”

“Uhhhhm. See that's one of the things I've been trying to work out on the backburner in my head, but I'd need some ballistics and... low energy physics experts. Edison Lens has the physicists, I suppose the ballistics experts are your department?”

Spiked mines of sunlight bobbed on the sea below us. It was that time when the afternoon has just started to sink in - half of the sky had bleached platinum and half was beginning to darken and wear. I spent as much time looking as I could. Beek's eyes caught me.

“Have you been to San Francisco?”

I was looking out to the other side of the sea. But the question had been surgically targeted nevertheless.



"What? No, of course not. I've been too busy."

"Of course. But you're gonna be even busier soon - and not on Earth any more, at that. I mean, I guess that'll be a hell of a vacation. But there's probably lots of Earth you wanted to see before heading out. That's part of why an old man like me is here, I suppose, to take some of the burden off a kid like you. You get to be a hero of the world, no matter what you do, just by being in the right place at the right time. I had to work my butt off to fool everybody I was that. Lighten up!"

I had been offered a few days of vacation soon - starting tomorrow. Before everything went to hell, supposedly. I glanced at Caroline - had she told him that? And now I wasn't sure I would even be able to take them, if I had to take charge of this whole operation they hadn't been telling me about - but I couldn't not take them, I couldn't not see her before I left -

I clenched my knuckles white on the white grille table and flinched as I saw Beek's victorious eyebrow raise.

Caroline was completely silent, had flipped her blue reflective sunglasses down over her eyes, and sucking the biggest piña colada I had ever seen out of a twisty straw.



The next few hours were a bizarre superposition. Halation and I were all business - we couldn't imagine connecting to this man on any other level - working out a timeline to complete the final models of an attack on the Clamps, while assembling the troops and material we knew we'd need, and supply lines for reinforcements we might need depending on what the models showed - while Beek tried to make small talk and distract us with anything he could think of. Though he didn't, or seemingly couldn't, think of any of the endless things that would have distracted me in his position - he seemed completely uninterested in the fact that he was also talking to humanity's first extraterrestrial contact, about the whole galaxy full of places unlike anything any human had ever seen, cultures unlike anything we had ever thought. Except when it came up in a strategic context - what terrains would we need to prepare for, what weapons did our enemies use, most of which he bracketed quickly for after we'd finished our first operation and started preparing for the expedition. ("Government fags are gonna wanna be in the room for every little detail, so we'll have to go over everything again anyway.")

"How am I ever going to live this down," I groaned to Alastair on the interactive screen communicating between any two suites in the complex later that evening, baked



out of my mind on a disposable vape from a dispenser. “They’re gonna push me out of this operation just by putting me around this guy!”

My suite, unlike my workspace or their (shared) glass balconied luxury corner apartment, was an ascetic affair, a glorified closet with no windows and a plastic-cushioned bunk sticking out of the wall - to prepare me for life in space.

“Live it down?” Alastair guffawed. “He’s evil but it’s still cool as hell that you get to meet Waldo Beek. You’re gonna meet so many famous people. I’d just treat it like collecting Pokemon. Even it’s an ugly Pokemon like uhhh. That bulldog one. It’s still part of your collection. By the way. You’re still on the stead and you haven’t met Ogier?”

I shook my head, then remembered he couldn’t see it on the phone. “No. Even the Edison Lens people don’t seem to know where he is. I’ve definitely heard him on the phone, in a meeting, though. The voice was garbled but the speech mannerisms were his. He’s paying attention.”

“Huh. Do you think he’s staying away from you for some reason?”



I laughed drily. “Why, does he think I’d just take my shot and kill him or something?” I probably could do that and Edison Lens would still have to listen to me. Maybe I should do something like that to Beek. If what I’d read in the investigative reports was true - not just the Kosovo ones but the ones about Afghanistan and Iraq, that got scrapped from every major newspaper and leaked in draft form to the antiwar blogosphere in the 2000s, where they kept getting taken down under odd circumstances every couple of years - not to mention whatever I didn’t know about Syria and God knows where else apparently - Waldo Beek was the kind of evil that deserved it even under whatever ideal of restorative, non-carceral justice you preferred. Yet my hatred for him was mainly distant, impersonal. I remembered him mostly as someone I made fun of on the internet for years, not all that differently from the guy who ran a tradcath “Crusader” MMO clan or the other Black Domnu defector who tried to start their own copycat cult with an angelic hierarchy of anime girls.

I was going to have to kill people who deserved it far less soon. What was I worried about?

You’re also going to have to tell a lot of people who deserve it as much as him who to kill, Halation reminded me.



I am too. And we're going to need people like him, because I never thought I'd have to do this. The Ahasurunu offered me a vow, when they rescued me, to defend the Anti-Adipose Alliance above any other value except the Precepts of Meteorology. I've been afraid to coerce you, that's under the Precepts, but I also have strength I can lend you, if you ever need it. Strength isn't the right word for it. Hardness.

It seemed almost laughable from this soft, literally fungal entity.

I know you like when you refer to you as if you're not reading this. Heheh.

"Are you OK?"

I was meditating on the way they said "known". It already felt like I had known Halation my whole life, but you notice how I struggle to get them down on the page, right? I'm sorry, Halation - some of it's having to go on paragraphs-long tangents to explain any of your thoughts or beliefs or experiences, but like, some of it's still just getting lost when I go digging for something, not having a map of this impossible mesh of connections.

"Hey lemme talk to my sister!" Jax fumed in the back-



ground. "Quit hogging her because you're her boyfriend or something now!"

"I told you, I'm not her boyfriend - she's an awful kisser."

I had wondered at first how Edison Lens was going to explain our disappearance to our parents, and then during the first interrogation where they let us see each other again, Caroline asked us, and we agreed to just literally not tell them anything, let the local cops send out search parties and get stonewalled by the feds swarming the area, let Cloudskater give his completely garbled testimony and get chalked up as a junkie who might have seen something but didn't have a clue what, let my dad field Facebook messages from local weirdos trying to connect our tragedy to the mysterious dome of light captured on grainy YouTube video. We fell on each other crying and laughing as Caroline tried to soberly game out a scenario. It was maybe more cathartic even than that first night in the trap. We knew we had both wanted to do something almost exactly like this, even if we couldn't remember when and if we had told each other.

Then right before we had split up to our separate transports, I pulled Alastair around the side of the truck and kissed him hard on the mouth.



Jax would probably have been the most startled of anyone - especially by the smarting pinkish scar left by a canine on his friend's upper lip - but Alastair should have by now explained, somewhere at a road stop outside of Edison Lens' surveillance, that the real reason I had done this was to briefly let Halation into his body to relay a discreet set of instructions.

I made sure not to make it pleasurable at all - except the tooth.

Alastair was to use his internet celebrity to moderately advocate me and my decisions on Earth and counter any propaganda that might be deployed against me, but emphasize that he was not in any contact with me and had been roped into the situation mostly by accident. He was to pretend to Edison Lens that he wanted as little to do with the campaign as possible, except to profit off his celebrity as a bit player in first contact and indulge in a comfortable life as a globetrotting influencer. He was to remain in contact with me by a method to be determined, and report anything that Edison Lens told him to do, following their instructions but also instructions I would add to them. He was to use his influence to find people competent to organize a global network with which I could communicate in

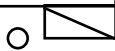


absolute secrecy, using a network based on the principles of the Carbonari, recruited from supporters of the line on the war and use of alien resources I would publicly advocate using the unrestricted media appearances Edison Lens had promised me.

“Hey, give my brother the phone if you’re gonna talk shit,” I said in an exaggerated tsundere snap, an absurd role to play but the kind of shit Edison Lens people would probably fall for.

Playacting this relationship, among other things, would help take their attention off the person I was seeing tomorrow.

They had been monitoring Mai, of course. I told myself what I had taken was something I would have demanded if they hadn’t offered it first. And Halation, I did ask you, that first night in the truck. As soon as our agreement was reached, their agent made contact. She was booked a hotel that night and moved in immediately, without a word to her parents. I remembered how small Mai’s bags - thin lavender and lilac plastic decorated with 90s squiggles, souvenirs of some mall that had closed when she was a kid - were, and how much she somehow packed in them, strings of Christmas lights like thorns around blankets and speak-



ers and a stuffed Chimera. This very night a flight was chartered, one of Ogier's private, from Seattle-Tacoma to San Francisco International airport. She had had to wait a week and a half, something I suspected was calculated to minimize our contact before I had worked with them for a bit and learned my role. A driver would tomorrow morning be taking her, like me, through the triple automated gates of Ogier's private dock, a massive carbon fibre platform extending hundreds of metres off the point of Bolinas. She had been informed the basics of why she had been given a permanent suite on the seastead of the second richest man in the world - of what her ex had to do with it - that her ex wasn't going to be there for very long anyway, and didn't want her to feel dependent on her in any way - or on Ogier, and would help her find a regular place in San Francisco, on Edison Lens pay, but outside the creepy island we spent a whole night under the covers together laughing at the promotional video for - that her ex might never see her again, in fact, even, and if she wanted to meet up just once, on the Ogier private beach before she got on the ferry out here, just to make sure we were on the same page about everything, and to meet someone you've wanted to meet your entire life, and to see the sunset and the fact that you're alive and happy and safe, and then we wouldn't even have to see each other if you didn't want -



At least, I hoped they had been able to convey all that. The beach. There was a ferry out to the beach at 11:00 in the morning. Which meant I wouldn't have time to watch Beek prepare a bunch of stuff for the assault they had only just bothered to tell me they were planning.

Was the point supposed to be that if I wasn't a silly soft-hearted faggot I wouldn't go see her? Was I supposed to take that from Waldo Beek, whose anecdotes always included a winkingly, smirkingly old-fashioned story or two about defying tactical common sense to reward some local conquest?

Or was it from Caroline?

Jax just wanted me to play video games with him via the interactive screen in the wall, connected to everyone else's. (I would still be able to see Mai on video through this. Maybe that would be easier, if we could just pretend there was the same distance between us we had come to expect.) I wasn't allowed to tell him much and he didn't have much to tell me, so the complex, efficient handshake of cooperation was closer than anything else we could have shared, unless I had dug into the past few years like I still wanted and didn't know how.



"I guess it would be better for you if you were playing something strategic."

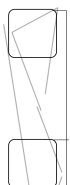
"Noooo, man, I need to get my head out of that or I'll go crazy. And believe me, from what I'm reading and the exercises they have me doing, there's no RTS that's gonna be close to the real thing."

"No FPS to real combat either, besides that one the army uses, I guess. But the military still has people work on them because it makes us better soldiers. Like kids playing war games or knights fighting tournaments used to, probably."

"Hmmm, if I was going for that I'd probably just play chess. Heheh. Do you think I'll pick it up in space? Become like a chess-playing mastermind? I could start playing with Halation."

Halation was interested.

"Do you think I could become a soldier in your army? I always used to think being recruited would do me a lot of good, except I didn't believe in any of the wars we were in."





I swallowed. Of course. What else would he do? What else would he go back to - Edison Lens getting him some normal job in Silicon Valley? Or a CIA drug trafficking gig?

"I mean probably whenever they start needing regular recruits I guess."

"I'm not sure I believe in this one - I mean, I still don't get what the fuck a Trans-Causal Adipose is. Sounds a lot like weapons of mass destruction. But I believe in you, at least."

See, to Halation the idea would never occur that someone would want to go to war so much they would make up a reason to.

"I'd believe in you too if you were up there. But."

"Awww, you don't have to pretend you wanna keep me out of it like I'm Mai or somebody. I didn't get into... what I was getting into at home because I didn't know how dangerous it was."

"How did you... how long did you..."

"Well here's the funny thing." He paused for over a minute, and wiped out an entire room full of enemies. "I also..."



I saw your posts about that girl, Delilah. About what she did. And I..."

I gasped, and got sniped from a balcony above the room I was entering.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think you have to be sorry. I think just... I forget sometimes that things are this woven together. That they always are, but not usually this close, you don't usually see them like this." I paused the game. I looked down at my feet through the swimming space. "I'm so high I can actually see it, you know. It kind of looks like... like Halation." I giggled. "Like the coloured fibres she's made out of, or the way the colours blend together when she melts." I had slipped into the gender again. They didn't mind it, they had told me, but I didn't want to use it if it didn't mean more than that.

(Was I still only capable of thinking of someone that good in female terms? Was that hanging over me from Black Domnu - and everything else, of course?

No, that's not it.





The reply came so instantaneous and firm I wondered for a second if I had imagined it.)

“Or like... there’s corals on Orchid. They’re the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen, but sort of creepy too, they go from the ocean to the stratosphere like totem poles, and they look like the ship from Alien but colourful, mostly red and white. And they’re almost all dead things, with only a few centimetres of living growth a year, but it all forms these incredible patterns over generations, the Meteorologists figured out how...”

“Maybe I’ll get to see them someday.” My brother’s voice rang hollow. “Save the stories for her, tomorrow. You might not get another chance.”

Alastair sat behind me on the motor of the small hovercraft used for transit to and from Plastic Beach - black silk button-up short sleeve shirt open over Gucci print board shorts (provided with the suite) and a plastic platinum chain of a Grey in the Baphomet posture (his own) - while I leaned on the front rail, watching the beach haze into view and picking at a patch of dry skin on my arm. A hired pilot with a starched white polo shirt and a perfect poker face was actually driving.



I was wearing - just to drive home to Mai what I was now - my Edison Lens uniform slacks (beige, a little too small, looked like a curtain fabric that had been in a hotel since the 70s) over my black tank top.

"Until we're ready to go public, I'm playing this like an ARG," Alastair was rambling. "Just posting short clips of this place with no context. No audio besides distorted Yeat tracks. Not even saying where I am but somebody in the comments located it this morning. Now they're trying to figure out if it's real or if I got the footage from somewhere. I wonder if Mai'll wanna be in on this somehow."

"Probably not. But you can ask her."

I scanned the beach - brown, clingy, wet sand - when we landed and didn't see her. Edison Lens GPS, which our escort was monitoring, said her car was already in, but the driveway was back out of sight, behind the concession stands and a tall concrete seawall topped with a stand of Indian paintbrush and California poppies. And beyond that, hills beyond hills buffering the private beach from prying eyes... I didn't think I had to worry about her turning and running the other direction. Or hope? I sort of hoped it was hope. Anyway, I had brought Clausewitz.



The clouds were forming big, rounded blooms that almost collapsed inward while letting trails of mist bleed off their edges.

I was reading when Alastair found her. Behind the end of the seawall where the sand trailed around behind it and a rock overhang stuck out on the other side, a little tidal pool was shaded by yucca branches. A few pieces of indistinct plastic fuselage, who knew if from another hovercraft or a regular yacht like there were a couple of anchored at the dock, stuck out from the shallow water and she was squatting among them, a straw hat with a blue silk tie floating almost antigravitationally on the billows of her neon purple and yellow 3C curls, tie-dye shawl around the spaghetti shoulder straps of her lemon lime one piece, the sun wavering in pale disks on the rounded bronze knees I had loved to make her giggle by kissing.

I bent my knees over the pool and she didn't look up as my reflection intersected with hers. This didn't necessarily mean anything painful; she had taken over a minute to acknowledge my presence on our first date, too. And as I stared into the dark grey of our mingling reflections on the rippled bottom of the tide pool, I saw what she was looking at: two or three pink amorphous sponges that



looked like collapsed stress balls covered with soft spikes trembling in all directions. The bodies beneath the spikes tensed and released, curled and uncurled softly and hesitantly, the way a diaphragm would rise and fall if one was teaching oneself, in one's sleep, to breathe.

She was hovering her finger over the water where the spikes almost reached the surface, not quite touching the surface, but maintaining an almost perfect symmetry with the reaching extremities on the other side of the mirror, and millimetering her fingertip closer or further as they approached and retreated.

Silently, I lowered my arm into our shadow. I extended my finger until its tip was hovering next to hers, as if separated by another liquid surface, but didn't respond to the movements of her finger, only to our common object of curiosity under the water. A rivulet of shifting colours ran down my shoulder, elbow, forearm to gather under my fingernail - and then extend, slower than gravity, to break the surface of the water, slipping under so gently it barely left a ripple, besides her slight gasp that broke the symmetry of our illusion of indifference to each other.

The colours ran all over the pink surface of the nudi-branch. I became aware, in a compartment of my mind,





of an immense pit of dark and soft-edged, but intensely real sensations coexisting with my own. And of Halation's fascination.

Her finger twitched at the edge of the water. And then - while my eyes were nailed to that spot, waiting for her to touch Halation and therefore touch me closer than I wanted to let her touch me - lifted away as she stood up... and hugged me.

I gasped.

Halation rolled slowly over Mai's shoulders, her hands, her forearms, but wasn't transferring anything except the feelings of the nudibranch - I knew it was a nudibranch because that was being transferred - we were, together, for a moment, the nudibranch, which was curious enough about us to let us. Not that it was the same kind of shared being as when Halation was in my brain; it was more like... well, what it was. A hug.

I got bored with it quicker than Mai, of course. Although I wasn't as bored when I let myself wonder about and imagine what it meant to her; this calm, this chord; when I sat in the gap that was still there, the shallows, the tidepool between us. I had come to offer her an existence she had



longed for across the stars, and here she was offering me another one that only existed here on Earth.

When we pulled apart, it was at the nudibranch's instigation; it wanted the full attention of the sun again.

"Hey, Mai," I gasped.

And when she looked up at me, her eyes were squinting so I couldn't read them but reflecting flashes of sunlight: "Leona. What the hell is going on? What are you doing here?"

"I... did they not tell you? If they didn't why did you do... what we just did?"

"I..." (echoing me) "I guess the alien must be real. I assumed it was all made up. You were trying to speak my old language so I wouldn't get scared. You had some other reason to be out here."

And then I remembered how I'd meant to separate myself from the inexplicable, impersonal, innocent closeness I'd allowed myself to enjoy for the last time.

"No, it's true. We're forming a human army. We're conquering the stars."





I chose the words like stilettos as I put my hands on her shoulders. I felt like a man. I felt like something I'd always secretly thought she only wanted because she was scared of.

But she just laughed. Drily. Lightly. Eyes closed and turned down to the sand. "For what?"

Halation wouldn't let me say anything that would humiliate her. "There's... a really important struggle out there, trillions of lives are at risk, and the stability of the universe itself for all eternity. It makes everything we fought for look like nothing. But it'll help us fight for that too."

I suddenly remembered a time, under the covers with a plastic lantern glowing cracked blue, we'd laughed that she'd read Ender's Game as a boy and I hadn't. It had scared her more than anything else as a child; she'd play out compulsive imaginary scenarios of being tricked into killing her imaginary friends, developed a persistent inexplicable belief that she would be used in such a way as an adult. "Traumatized" her, as she put it in the tone of "that weird Mark Twain Satan cartoon traumatized me as a kid", before I knew about anything else about her childhood. God, I found out about so many things so much later in the relationship than anyone reading this must be assum-



ing, although I could sort of tell just a few weeks in. It's fine, I don't have the right to talk about most of it.

"It's been a long time since I've been worried about fighting for anything." She said it as if it'd been a long time since we'd left each other. For me it felt so recent that was half of the rawness I felt. "I'm just trying to live as long as I can. I feel like I'll prove something by doing that, even if it's not good, even if it's not happy, even if it's not worth it, even if it's not as good as it would have been with you... and then you dragged me here, and swept all of that out from under my feet. Like I have a whole life to decide what to do with now. And I'm gonna owe it to what? Space Iraq? Why are you really doing all of this? Don't tell me you're doing it for me, you know I wouldn't want it."

I was silent, loading, with no idea what I could possibly have been caught off guard by, but wondering for the first time for real if I was doing the right thing. Which was absurd; I was talking to someone who knew nothing about the situation and who I was keeping from knowing the full situation. "I mean, it's all Halation's idea as much as mine."

Oh, come on -



Nevermind, I get it.

She blinked. "That's their name. Your person didn't tell me their name."

"They're not really my person." I gulped, admitting it even though I'd been planning to pretend the opposite. "I'm not really in charge of anything here."

"Ohh. Sorry." She walked over to a piece of fuselage. "Sorry. I can't talk. I - I need to sit with any of this being real for a second." Her voice cracked with laughter.

When she was done sitting - I looked at my phone, at my old secret Twitter account for lurking, they had drones projecting Wi-Fi on this beach - she didn't try to talk again but walked over to the water.

She waded in half-steps out into the water, and shivered when it touched her hips. I stayed behind on the shore and dropped my pants; underneath I had a pair of athletic swim shorts with red fractals around the hems. And under my tank top, a top she had made for me out of sunflower-gold neoprene someone had sent her in lieu of an online payment, star buttons on the straps, my breasts half-filling the space she'd given them to grow into.



I glanced back and Alastair was running back along the edge of the beach dragging (bumping; he was going too fast for it) the glass pod on a wheeled plastic base he must have been wrangling off the boat during the time we were bonding over the nudibranch.

"Hey," I called out to him, "there are nudibranchs in the tide pool over there!"

"Oh cool," he acknowledged as he turned his head to me but didn't stop running. "You wanted this for Halation, didn't you?"

"Not right now, we're going in the water."

Alastair nodded, tilted the pod over, and laid back on the sand, leaving the water respectfully to us. Mai ran back and grabbed me by the wrists, somewhat roughly, and silently. As if to say, come on, I'm not comfortable here either, but what are we going to do, nothing? Try to smile, try to make this normal.

I shook myself off from her slippery palms and ran out past her, up to my diaphragm where I could leap forward and slide straight in like a dolphin without impact. Halation wasn't used to how water felt on my eyes, but they were





used to how it felt on other sensory organs, so we were respectively surprised by our comfort and discomfort. I could make more sense of my own senses in the filtered dark without my unconscious aura of panic around them.

Then I swam forward until I sensed wonder behind me, turned around, and saw Mai floating in a shaft of green-grey fizzing light, like a clay doll, her hair spreading, her mouth open.

I torpedoed back and almost landed nose-first in her stomach until she brought one hand forward in slow motion and blocked me with her palm kung fu style, then grabbed my nose. Started laughing, grabbed her own nose as air started escaping it, and shot back up to the surface.

We swam around her with our hair just poking out of the water.

Eventually we helped her all the way out to a brown seaweed-soaked rock outcropping and all sat silently - until she asked about Halation, and I passed them to her completely, and watched her sit in glazed silence, with no idea what Halation was telling or showing her.

“It’s so different from what I imagined.” There were tears



on her bottom eyelashes like plastic decorations.

I shivered the water across my skin. I'd never seen her break her suspension of disbelief like that - no, I had when I'd first met her, but not since we'd started dating and somehow even less since Delilah died - but now what choice did she have? I had the sudden, ridiculous, understating thought that it was like finding out Santa Claus was and wasn't real at the same time.

"Maybe if we had done something together, it would have looked more like this."

I had somehow hoped that learning the truth out there would free Mai's imagination. Maybe it still would, but I had forgotten how much it would hurt first. Maybe she wasn't thorough the way I was when I edited wikis - when I'd tried to make a wiki for her it had failed, our first fight and we'd been so horrified by it then, not even a fight just me asking her questions and her getting more and more exhausted - but she was consistent, every detail with every other, every thought in the same universe for years, and that delusive consistency was the difference between her as an adult and the scrawled papers she had snuck out of her house from her childhood, a brittle shell in which she dragged around her soft imagination like a snail. The same



kind of shell Mab had - I'd thought of them as rivals for my faith, which had become all love, when I'd first met her - but Mab had to keep people trapped in it with her. (Was that another thing I'd been afraid of before I left?)

"How far did we. Ever even talk about that." Involuntarily, I edged closer. "What would it even have been for."

If anything I hoped that learning the truth out there would free Mai's imagination. Maybe it still would, but it had to hurt first. It had to - was I taking pleasure in that thought? Maybe it didn't, maybe it was one of those things like a breakup that some people really didn't feel any bitterness over. I had almost convinced myself I was one of those, and if she wasn't she hadn't given the slightest indication, because despite being the one who had broken up with me, she had made even less effort since to hold us apart.

This didn't even confuse me, because on some level, I knew, she didn't process things in this world, only in that one - so what would happen when that was torn away from her? If I couldn't stay close to her through that, who could?

"I dunno, you had all kinds of ideas back then."

"I wasn't even editing Wikis any more. I wasn't even read-



ing. I was studying or on Tumblr 24/7. How the hell did you put up with me.”

“No but you would tell me about stuff. Stuff you did when you were a kid. I still remember you saying it was the only way you could feel real, and still feel like the present you. I still think about that.”

OK, so she was doing this on purpose. The certainty washed over me like a warm wave. I stretched out my toes in it. She wasn’t as good at it as Delilah, but Mai was better than she let on at the passive cruelty parts of femininity.

“You did too.” It wasn’t cruel. I remembered holding her through it.

“Remember when we tried to do littlespace?” she giggled. Giggling didn’t help.

“Don’t show Halation that. I’m not kidding.”

“I haven’t shown them anything explicit. Have you?” She blinked. Then let her eyes fold up again. “Neither of us could do a parent role. But that twelve minutes we met up in elementary school and infodumped about stuff we were into, that was pretty fun.”



“How do you remember the number of minutes?!” I snapped. I did too.

But then she was smiling again. “It’s fine! I’m fine. I was still way closer than most people, I think! Leona, do you still have pictures of those anime drawings of the Adamski Venusians I had in the folder from high school?”

My giggles broke through me. “Oh my god I completely forgot about those.” How did this fit into trying to hurt me with memories - why would she give me a free strike?

“And then I tried to make them black because I didn’t like any of the Hotep ones. I’m glad I tried to kill myself before making ‘Black Venusian Bishounen’ a concept to be honest.”

I flinched, thinking I should have probably warned Halation more clearly about the level of pain they would be sharing. Maybe she needed someone to share it like that, like I’d never been able to. Maybe she needed Halation more than me.

She fixed me with a look that was like an infinitely extending spear. “Look, you know I have to work up to harder stuff. So you can just sit with it.”



I gulped and nodded.

By that time Alastair was paddling towards us, using the pod as a floater, a weak fountain bubbling where his heels pattered above the water like a tiny motorboat engine.

The pod, one of Edison Lens' state of the art replacements for my setup in the shower, was a physical comfort for Halation even though they hadn't figured out how to give them much to do in there. But what were we doing now besides watching the sunlight butter the undersides of the clouds?

I placed my hand on a rubber sphincter at the top of the pod, and let Halation flow down and into her shape as she filled out the subtly blue-green gas mix. Mai gasped, even though she had presumably just seen the shapes in her head and memories. "Is it weird if I... put my face close."

"Should have asked earlier," I laughed, "but no. I'm sure."

She climbed on and around the pod, peering in at different angles.

If this could have happened three months ago. I was glad Halation wasn't in me to hear me think it any more, and





Mai wasn't paying attention to see the grimace on my face. When I could have reached out to rub her shoulders or squeeze her hips or nestle my face under her chin -

Alastair took us out of this uncomfortable dynamic by talking to her about music for a bit; he was trying to convince her to put some synths on a beat for a friend of his. I was ready to fucking pounce if he did anything weird the entire time but he didn't, which maybe said something bad about how he thought of me but might have been for the sake of preserving the appearance of our involvement.

I wondered what surveillance they could possibly have on us out here. We were near naked; we were out of range of even the wifi drones; I knew from strategy discussions they didn't have anything crazy like nanotech or robot animals.

The boat driver pulled up to us on a skidoo. He had a bouffant receding hairline and stupid Bono glasses. "How you kids doing? You want drinks or anything? We got em on the boat."

Mai turned away from me to make eye contact with Alastair then shook her head - "No thanks, maybe in a bit" - as Alastair stood up: "I for one am gonna go make some ironic Jimmy Buffett Tik Toks. If only my mom could see



me now! Ciao.”

He climbed onto the back of the skidoo as the jackass chaperone rummaged in a freezer full of random shit I hadn't looked at on the way. He held out two red, white and blue popsicles in plastic wraps. (One of the guys had had one at the truck and I hadn't thought anything of it! How?) I had stopped liking them when I had realized the nationalistic implications of the colours - shockingly late, we had laughed about that together - but then Mai had given me another interpretation; they were the three colours of star, besides yellow, the vague dim burn of our weak sun. A yellow sun, though this had never been observed (and Halation had surely shown her that it never had and never would be), could alchemize into the rarest of stars, a pink sun - red and white, hot and cold, together in miraculous superposition, instead of awkward compromise. (That was supposed to be us, but we ended up no different from this rotten sun that shone its light on us.) Mai turned her head back towards me with ominous, mechanical slowness as I watched them pull away.

“So,” Mai asked, “am I a hostage?”

I froze, opened my mouth several times, needing all the coldness I'd mustered at the beginning of the conversa-





tion and then allowed to flow out of me.

"I just... want you to live a peaceful life."

"Of course you do. What I want to know is, is that my choice or not?"

I stopped dead.

"Like, what if I told them I wanted to go to space?" She smiled cruelly up at the sky, which was starting to get sick-ly with gold. "It's not like I imagined it, but it's still... not here. Not this stupid techie resort either. A lot of what Halation was showing me was beautiful."

"I don't, uhhh, know they'd let you, for a bunch of reasons..."

"Right," she huffed, "recruiting sarge won't let me on board because I'm a fat schizotypal tranny with a bunch of suicide attempts. And they put you in charge of this whole thing for some reason? What's really going on here?"

"How much did Halation tell you?"

"I didn't ask them, because I wanted to ask you. But I figured out enough - like how they can and can't com-



communicate - like how much leverage you could have if you wanted to. I want to know what you're doing with it."

"Mai," my voice breaking, "we don't have that kind of relationship any more. I'm not obligated to tell you..."

"You're doing it again!" She stood up, got between me and the sun. "I can't believe it, you're doing it again. Just because I'm more femme than you doesn't mean I'm like, gender affirmed by being treated like the damsel you need to protect, the pining woman you leave on the shore for seven years." She glanced to the side. "Well, maybe a bit. But the last time you did that you made it worse!"

"That was also the last time I got you involved with a bunch of dicks in uniforms! What am I supposed to do?"

"No," she yelled, "it was the last time you got involved with a bunch of dicks in uniforms! To save me! And now I have to make sure you don't do it to the entire planet - or the galaxy! To my world!"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I looked over my shoulder. One of the branches of Hala-tion's body had woven its soft tendrils into a single drill-



tip point, and was tapping on the pod.

Did those fuckers really make it without a way to let themselves out from the inside?

“I think they want to say out of the pod.” I stretched my arm over the top of the pod, extending my hand to the aperture

“Can they tell we’re talking? Can they tell we’re in the middle of something?”

“Actually in that body I don’t think they can even perceive anything outside of the gas.”

Mai gasped. “That’s cruel! It’s like a Pokeball?! I thought they were sunbathing with us!”

“Well, the sunlight in the gas is something they can feel...”

“What are you waiting for? Let them out already!”

I stuck my hand back in the aperture. “Does that mean we’re making up for now?”

“Be quiet. Ask Halation what it’s OK to tell me. I only talked to them about space because I wanted to ask you first.”



She lay down and rolled over.

“You’re telling me I’m doing what we broke up over again, but you’re talking like we didn’t even break up.”

She propped her head back towards me on a wrist. (Compressing droplets down the lines of her shoulder.) “Huh? What in the audacity -“

This was an entirely different kind of cruelty than I had been prepared to use, but I had a plan.

“Why are you so determined to get involved in this? I gave you a place to live the rest of your life, and never have to see me again.”

“We already established I didn’t want that. We were staying friends. Maybe we won’t if you become space dictator, or you keep doing whatever this is... but I want to stay friends, and that’s why I want to know” -

“Aren’t we being naive? Everything we fought over... it’s gonna be so small in the scale of what’s coming. Do you think we’d survive that even as friends? I’ve given you a place to stay out of it. That’s all I can do for you, which means we were right about each other in the first place.



I came out here because obviously I couldn't make first contact without telling you, and to say good-bye to you."

"Leona..."

"I wanted to do this while Halation was in the thing too, but maybe they need to know what this means to me."

I waved to the hoverboard, and heard it start up. Mai's palm hit my shoulder, slammed me to the ground.

"No! Stop! Fuck you!"

"I just wanted to see you again. It wasn't even fair to you in the first place."

She slapped me. Not lesbian domestic abuse stats, don't give a shit. Bright slap, Gundam. "I did! Don't you get it? This is it! This is the carelessness! It's not selfishness, it's carelessness! Don't fucking do this act -"

"I care about you. Maybe too much. I will always care about you."

"- when it's gonna hurt both of us!"

She pulled me up by the swimsuit straps. Straight into it.



Straight into tear-salt capturing gold powder lipstick.

Straight into big fake eyelashes brushing my eyelids shut.

Straight into the clueless harshness with which she crushes her nose right into you.

Straight into letting my top canine hook into her bottom.

Straight into warmth like a star dissolving into heat.

Straight into-

A few weeks after Delilah, I'd talked you down from realistic suicidal planning three times already, you'd been wandering around the house saying your intrusive thoughts out loud, banging your head on the wall to shake out music or something other than incomplete, obsessive, for the first time contradictory worldbuilding about death. I was barely doing any better, to say nothing of Sophie, I had slept three hours, but I was going up to your place for the fourth time this week. I didn't mind. Cuddling wordlessly with you was the best thing I could do then, the only good part of those days I remember.

When I rang you, I didn't get any response. I waited for somebody else to open the door of the building and snuck





up to your apartment. The deadbolt had been broken since you moved in and I'd spent half a month's paycheck to replace it with a fancy combination lock since you would get scared of your family tracking you down. (They still tried.) I entered the number (it meant "starflower" in a sort of space gematria you had made up). The plastic box buzzed angrily. Wrong password.

I called. And messaged Facebook, and Tumblr, and Twitter. And tapped, then banged on the door. And called again.

I paced up and down the hallway for 10, 15 minutes, checking each of my messages. I couldn't focus on anything else. I wanted to pray to something, but all my metaphysical feelings had been swallowed by your world, and wouldn't mean anything if you were gone. (Which was fucked, because that had to be part of the point of them, to outlive you, didn't it? But for me...) I thought of Black Domnu, but any prayer I offered up would be returned to me as a curse, a primordial sickle claw striking you down if you weren't dead already - this is what you get for abandoning me. At around the 13-minute mark, my father's voice started creeping into my mind. I've always told you there's no one you can pray to. You know I wouldn't be mad if you went and got involved with people who pray, though, that's



just what sensible people do. Instead you went and got involved with someone that weak who can't even pray to anything! You went and made yourself that weak! All this time you've been pretending you're strong for running away and making things hard for yourself. What made you think you could help someone like that when you couldn't even get a real job, keep your head down, ignore the things you need to ignore to get what you want? Society has rules to tell you what to pay attention to and what to ignore, what's worth your time and energy and what isn't. You feel like your gender isn't right, who cares, that doesn't get you anywhere. Be a man and you can help "her". Follow the rules - not the ones you made up, not the ones some spectre handed down, the real ones - the ones with guns and money backing them up - and you can help "her". Or not, if she doesn't want it. But then, that doesn't matter.

My fingers hovered over the keypad on my cellphone. She had told me never to do this. I knew a million reasons why.

Do you really care? Get real, now, or "she"'s going to die. You'll learn the same lesson either way. There are rules to situations like this. They're designed to prevent you from getting into them in the first place. Follow them. For your own good.

My fingertip skewered the "9" like I was stabbing myself.





Your little experiment ends now. The way I always knew it would. Both of you. Now pick up the pieces, and get out with what you can.

I hammered the “1” like the nail that sticks out.

I wanted to tell you, Mai, and I couldn’t without sounding ridiculous, in that moment I wasn’t even Leona. “Leona” was willing to die to save you - but [deadname] would have happily killed you to save itself.

I can’t even remember pressing the second 1, I was so numb.

You had swallowed three tabs of acid six hours ago and laid down on your favourite blanket on the floor, locked in there with no light but your lava lamp and glow in the dark stars on the ceiling, hoping to change something. You had told me you were planning this - a week ago - you hadn’t set a date, but when the thoughts came thundering down on you in the worst monsoon yet you knew it was now or never. When they broke down the door in body armour you had a panic attack that lasted sixty seconds in which you were an entire planet devoured by black armoured insects then somehow broke into a survival mode you said felt like being “piloted” and calmed them down with a sto-



ry you made up about changing the number because you kept forgetting it, you were so calm even the pigs could tell something was off even though they couldn't tell you were high, treating them like a neighbour who had walked in by accident, and when one of them tried to put a hand on your wrist and suggest you follow him to the car I was Leona again and ready both to die and get it on camera. I couldn't believe we both made it out alive either. You refused to look at me for the rest of your trip, just huddled under a blanket over your computer while I wandered around in a daze and cooked ramen.

They asked over and over for your parents, for someone to contact to confirm everything was OK; you gave them that old forum administrator who helped you get out and hoped they would smooth things out somehow.

That wasn't everything, we'd already been talking about it, you felt guilty about being a burden on me, I kept saying the wrong thing and triggering you, we wanted different things out of sex and neither of us knew what, but that was it. You sent me a callout post you said you were going to delete, just so I could think about it and what I would change. You still messaged me on Discord every day but couldn't be in the same room as me for weeks without





freezing up. You said you still needed me but now knew you needed not to.

We had slipped back under the water. There, surveillance shouldn't have had any way to see Halation covering and joining both of our bodies, almost translucent, like an oil slick, like another particular formation of light through water on our skin. Petals of orange afternoon suspended in green glass.

Mai, I asked soundlessly, but forming words, what would you do, if this was something - if we were making this up?

There's nothing like the Freezefire Light?

The Freezefire Light was what the Choir of the Big Bang, ancestors and mediators to all the stellar peoples in her world, used to quell evildoers - an indigo radiance that induced biological stasis except for the brain until an enemy had worked through whatever conflict was making them want to do harm.

Although hadn't she told me the Choir had been breaking down for Millennia - no one was even sure if it still existed - and it never came to silent planets like this one?



No.

Then I'd want to understand the Adipose as well as possible. Understand what could be done to contain it in places that don't want it, for people who don't want to be affected by it. If I understand it correctly, it's a bit colonial, right? Like it changes parts of space in ways not everybody there gets to have a say in, for people in other parts of space. That's a pretty good definition of that, actually; but I'm not sure you get exactly what that means here. I'm not sure her white ass would be able to explain to you properly; either, although I know she'd try. The thing is I'm not sure it means the same thing for you as for us. Here almost everyone who did that just straight up wanted to murder and enslave people. But it sounds like the people who want this Adipose... just wanna keep in touch with everyone else after the world ends, which I would want, too. But they don't get to just walk all over other people for that.

Her every word (even in her mental "voice") was measured, in a way I had only heard her a few times, because usually if she measured words like that, she just wouldn't say them. The last time I'd heard her like this, we were deciding what exactly it meant to break up.

That's what I was doing, Halation intervened, with a rush of passion we could feel in both of our bodies, tensing and





wanting air. Non-partisan scientific research into anti-Adipose fields. (Sure, non-partisan run by the Ahasurunu, but...) The pro-Adipose faction blew them up. Civilians. An entire reef.

Mai nodded with a graveness belied by the way her cheeks puffed out when she thought, the way she rocked back and forth. Her hair swirled around her like ribbons in a Chinese ballet. In that case I'd focus on whichever faction or sub-faction is targeting that stuff first. Make protecting non-partisan research projects, that could end up deciding or limiting the focus of what the war's even over, a priority for human involvement. You aren't taking orders right? You're taking contracts, as an independent... I don't know exactly know what kind of structures there are for this in the rest of the universe. But you should set your own priorities, instead of leaving them to a guy like Waldo Beek or some aliens you don't know. I still don't know if it was a good idea to drag us into this, but I know I'd rather have you - both of you - dragging us into it than anyone else.

You're saying this?

Yeah, I'm saying this as someone who knows better than anyone else on the planet that you're an idiot, and the



kind of idiot who can hurt people at that. But that was the fucked up thing about us, wasn't it? When's the last time you met a non-idiot who wasn't evil? You're the closest I ever met, and even you weren't close enough to live with.

That's... grim.

She choked in a laugh that would have sucked water into her lungs. I know, right! But look on the bright side: no one's gonna be competent where you're going. Not even Beek, or Bennett-Fog, or any of those people who are trying to tell you what to do.

They did talk to me about getting you involved as like, a consultant. The way they have sci-fi writers in the war room for these things. I shut them down, but if you want...

She was silent for a long time. Pangs of guilt, panic, bled over from her to me, and I tried to think of something to say to take the pressure off. I don't think it would be a good idea. I can help, there are things I can do, but not that. She settled, like ripples evening out. I'd never seen her do it that fast. What had she been learning without me - what had I been holding her back from learning - and how.





The problem is, if I really had been dying in that room, there was no one you could have called to help me. No one you should have. You're going to be in a lot more situations like that, I think. A long time ago I told you, the thing I most need from someone who loves me is to know how to let go of me. Not just from your life, but from this world, if I ever decide it's time to go for real. And you're going to need to let go of a lot of lives... without letting go of the part of yourself that cares about them. Without turning them into something else, something already dead, something expendable, in your head. I think in a weird way, because of me, you've faced that problem already.

So had she - that was, what I had learned, what she was doing with Delilah, in that room.

The planet the cops had chewed up was the planet of the dead.

It took her weeks to establish that Delilah's soul was still out there somewhere.

It was because of me. It was still my fault.

Humans care a lot about whose "fault" something is. That was Halation.



If you lived here you would too.

They landed at 2 in the morning, right at the end of the vacation Edison Lens had scheduled for me.

By then the Bay Area had been evacuating for two days. Coastal areas had gone first - SF county, San Rafael, Richmond, Berkeley, Oakland - into huge cloth hangar shelters out in empty parts of Contra Costa and Alameda and Santa Clara that were already being called FEMA camps. (Alistair had released one video, one of the camps filmed from above on an Edison Lens drone, captioned: "This isn't FEMA camps. This is bigger. Trust the Plan.") The official story was credible threats of a dirty bomb, they couldn't say from who except it wasn't a national actor, no need for alarm about World War 3. Everyone had also been told it was imperative to back up any personal electronics on a solid state drive and get that as far away as possible, in case of an EMP.

When power went out throughout the entire Bay Area, the shelters had backup running but lost internet and communications.





But it wasn't an EMP. As people in the not fully evacuated zones discovered, the tendency wasn't for things to stop running but to overheat. It was as if a virus was running on everything at once. At first this was most obvious on cell phones and disconnected laptops, fans whirring and programs crashing, windows smeared in asymmetrical streaks across the screen. After the first hour or so of outage, though, everything came back on at once and couldn't be turned off. Rolling blackouts would ensue as it overloaded again and again. The grid was running on its own, and seemed to be figuring out how to control itself in real time.

They settled in the Oakland Inner Harbour, between the Oakland and Alameda Power Plants. Their "tails" lay back to back on Coast Guard Island. Collapsed boats and upturned asphalt settled into new, more stable geological terraces under their immobile bodies. Their "clamps" cracked through the shells of the power plants on either shore and with golden tendrils like the Ohmu in *Nausicaä* somehow fused with the wires inside. A gridded circulatory system under the translucent plates of the mandibles glowed yellow-orange as they fed, as did a number of target-like phosphorescent rings where eyes might have been on a terrestrial equivalent. The colours I had seen on the tele-



scope, opaque against the dark of space, were in fact translucent like the casing of an old iMac, and even at night just the flickering, sparking streetlights would highlight shadows of bubble- or chain-organelles. The firefighters deployed under military direction to take care of buildings burning from power bursts, though legally signed to secrecy and forbidden personal electronics, got out the first videos that made it onto the web. Then people started flying drones in. They would spiral out of the air if they got too close, but some 4chan kid calculated the safe height from previous instances and did a livestreamed, systematic, one-hour survey. We didn't take it off Youtube. The spectacle wouldn't have worked without a hint of secrecy, but the point was the spectacle.

The live fire at night, rhythmic light and thunder on the horizon, already proved to anyone aboveground that something other than a bomb threat was going on. This part of the show was essentially a military parade, designed to generate flattering footage of hardware that was bouncing right off them. Their translucent armour was a novel state of silicon in a self-readjusting lattice (that took the computing power of a brown dwarf star to discover, but was easy for even blind replicating algorithms to reverse-engineer) that oscillated between diamond hardness and rub-





very elasticity. We hadn't figured out an armour-piercing round that would work, and Beek had ordered up some experimental bunker-busters from Arizona built for a DOD contract no one thought would ever get put to use. Halation was telling me there was a way to do it if you mounted a Weak Asymmetry Field to them in the right way, but I wasn't telling, because it wasn't the best way to get rid of them anyway, and I needed that to put myself back in charge.

Tanks and mortars lined up in the harbour roads between stacks of coloured metal crates. Supply routes ran up and down the tight grid of downtown Oakland from bases safely in the hills. Beek took me out, on a personal helicopter, to view it every morning. I didn't know what point he thought he was making. It just felt like a child's dream of being surrounded by sized-up wargame miniatures. The power lines everywhere randomly humming and exploding - the military had to truck in their own cables for everything, wrapped in a superinsulator - added to the sense of incoherent, imaginary apocalypse. The Clamps had one reaction to any assault sufficient to bother them, which was to thrash. While keeping their mandibles thoroughly enmeshed in the power station, they would undulate along the length of their bodies and flop up and down like a fish



pulled onto the deck of a boat. Sometimes it would be side to side, which scrapped a row of poorly placed tanks once, but they didn't actually move. The area where they were beached was pretty much flattened anyway, so it didn't even do any impressive property damage. Most of that was just our own artillery going astray, crashing through another shop window in Chinatown, caving in the roof of a strip mall, bending a lamp-pole across the highway. Beek would spend half the time just yelling boomer jokes and weird training academy slogans at guys in jeeps going past, and the rest of the time he'd be filling out Excel charts in his phone.

One time Hiram Ogier came out to the front. He was wearing a jet-black poncho that might even have been vantablack - he was famous for wearing that - because I couldn't make out any creases or shadows as it cracked in the wind, over khaki slacks rolled up around his Italian loafers. His giant sideburns, biker-style over ear on bald head, whipped against his sunken face as he stared at his feet perched on the edge of a jeep, but looked up to fix me with his black sunglasses as he passed.

I had my own phone out as I stood behind Beek. I had told him I'd started my own strategic note, and he'd given me





the exact precious look I'd expected, but still winced at, and never acknowledged it again. I had an audio file open in Azoth Drive, and if he had so much as glanced back he would have assumed it was a recording of the stats the lieutenant colonel was delivering in an air-cannon monotone. We had a hell of a time teaching our coders, but Halation had explained how to protect the Plastic Beach intranet, which now extended to every military unit brought in under our command, from the "virus" the Clamps delivered. They hadn't explained much of what that "virus" was, or how they delivered it.

Wi-Fi and data were down throughout the city.

I wasn't on the Plastic Beach network.

On the screen, over my browser, or homescreen, or any other display I toggled it to, was a glowing target-ring, electric blue or purple depending on the angle I tilted my screen at. If I pressed it, my connection bars lit up or went down. If I held it down longer, a stream of posts formatted for different websites - Facebook, Reddit, Snapchat, Next-Door - floated across my screen, all pictures of translucent humped shell over cracked roofs the horizon, flares rising and falling at night over the FEMA fence, status updates like "hey is everyone else on this?" and "bruh what the



fuck goin on". Blackout meditation Tik Toks. E-girls taking candlelit baths in the dark. Livewatch apocalypse movie marathons. All from within the blackout zone. "Is the government watching us?" "Does the government know this exists?" "Are we all going to Gitmo for being on here?"

If I held it down again, it glowed bright enough to obscure anything behind it, and any other element on my screen became movable. I pulled the sound file out of Azoth Drive and towards the centre of the circle.

A set of interfaces, including all my social media, floated across the screen. I ignored them all and pressed the centre of the circle, and it disappeared.

I kept my finger on the centre of the circle.

It took a couple of minutes for my screen to go black and text to come up in an unreadable programming language, seemingly random series of letters and numbers repeating as regularly as letters of the alphabet, columns spaced like lines of avant-garde poetry. The only colour or graphics on the screen, the same concentric circles.

I held it down one last time until the audio file resurfaced through the wormhole.





I let it go, hundreds of lines of code wrote themselves across my screen in seconds, and then my phone bricked.

That night when every computer and modem and mobile phone and game console and Apple TV in the blackout area came on at once, for the hundred and fourth time in three days since the landing - the shortest lasting a microsecond, the longest eight hours - a file appeared and played on every single device that had been blacked out. Very few of these devices - though they all had the concentric circles somewhere on their screen - were occupied. Active users dismissed the file to the corner of their screens as just another random eruption of their glitching devices and reality; others sat and listened for four minutes, coming away existentially pensive and with a renewed sense of mystery. On rows of abandoned computers filling office towers, on the other hand, it looped for hours, a noise that could be heard from outside the half-open windows as an insect-like buzzing.

When the sun goes nova

And the world turns over

I don't want to be alone,



2'
LWCIGI2I
AET
TWCN2 *So honey, come on home...*
VCCNM2VM
WPECENW2
GTLNBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4'
NT1VIC2
23E
202FENDI
1B2NM
0N12
VGI0N4'
WVENW
DOTOBE
EI
TVOBE
M1N1
1WCID1D0
1ENLOB
E102MOD
2ED DO
WE EG11'
VD1B12CI
1N8
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
DOTOB
1B2NM
TOBEM





SCARRED ZERUEL

Name: cammy

Birthday: 3,074.3.57 HP

Occupation: hackergurl

Sex: female

Blood type: a-

Likes: a good mem trade, lifefash,
ghost sunlight

diLikes: juicebox moons

Seen with: the neuroxia in all
eyes



by: rumour hell



Name: morgan

Sex: male

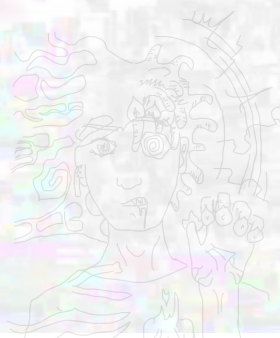
Occupation: keeper of a with-
ered bracing

neurodivergence: huskshedder.
under care of sister leaeth of
the sixth gate

Likes: warm neosoil

Dislikes: SunNet shadowbans

Blood type: a-



character profile



*'We are talking of the body of the beloved... if you know the wilder-
ness in the same way you know love, you would be unwilling to let it
go.'* — terry tempest williams

this is a love note to those you know because as of now you
haven't put it into words yet. i see how you never could.
and in that way your heart in others can seal away when
they leave. slip from you, and in their absence suggest the
need for the words in the first place.

i have seen it this way & others, felt in my bones when i
first embraced the earthlight, saw the lines here mapped
and chartered by their divergent skews, so easy for me to
read. like my sisters of other Gates would never have as
easy a time, and how somehow i was chosen for it, and
i chose, all these new maps, to do and say little, because
i knew a soft touch here, a fleeting phrase there, to get
them to the Core when otherwise they might live out the
perishing, complain little, lose their home, die alone in its
carcass. where the leaves will be cold to the touch, and
curling in dark stain to the dark earth beneath.

i remember days in the Gate not myself. grubbing and
scrabbling with my sisters, and the shared amniotic mind,
all our tick ticks and pressings, our wants into the amnius

changelog



to spread like inkstain through water, all our wants melded together while our legs scrabbled over each other, and we dreamt of a world past the Gate, somewhere to seek out the way we had been bred to.

and it was of Aurachne's will, filtered to the us through the Gate so some of us were chosen and some of us were left behind. So it was the Twelfth Gate that was sent into the planarseas, into the Cosmere to find a planet on the verge of EV, touch down as Oracles to bend exiles to the Core.

and by the time they are sent we are tuned to them. to the grub that wriggles at the core of once unliving earth before the digitalis spread over it, and the flora was machine, and the fauna just markers for the way the digitalis has spread through its breath, passing in half-way and living halfway lives.

this is a love note to those you know and it is still here because as of now you haven't sent it. because all i saw was loneliness and i'm sure my sisters of the Sixth saw the same thing, all the feints and flickers of love and longing on schedule, all the way Aurachne says it is when we don't



know each other. don't have the Cosmere mapped out to seek and find. we know the Harvest Point because as Aurachne we were where the action is. but Aurachne thinks, insert yourself into the grub that grows. for when it takes wing it will include you in it, in the patterns of its wings when it rises.

and when he entered the walled sun was it like jumping back to birth? in the vats, cold, naked in gloop and as a child scattered to the fringes of the Mutate. was it like jumping back to the vats, would it trigger that? because all that was locked beneath the halo, and now the halo has served its purpose, and is gone, where he is, where he no longer needs it. because this is a love note to those you know and it is here where you can no longer find it. it all slips away, into my dreams which i keep to myself.

keep to myself while you tell all your dreams to me.

-mindpool archival (strand-coded as 'solipsis' in the milk-web), Sixth amnius, reading forwards and backwards from Leaeth's choosing



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIGISI
TT
2
SVN
CIVS
BBV
CUMMOD
BISOS
CBVQIDV
DVICES2
SEE
IBSN
ONIS
WIGONV
WQCV
DOGOVE
EL
GOBOVE
MI MI
IMCIDIDN
LEWFOV
EINSMOD
SED DO
WE EGII'
VDIBISCI
INB
CONSECIE
WMEI'
SII
DOGOV
IBSN
GOVEN





Last Time

The sun through the canopy uncertain, Morgan follows a shimmer glitch through the Skein, finds the Psyche Oracle in his Tender and discovers the encroaching smoke.

Cammy wanders the edges of the freak show in the Cluster, a dimensional refugee under the infinite eyes of the Velih and the mote auras, seeking home in Jewel's dangerous investigations of the Loum.



CW: reality distortion, subjective disintegration, body permeability, body horror, death, religion, church, blindness, violence

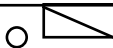
(ε/ Δ)

CLEAN FLAME

It was the light and nothing else, and wired into the earth, silence had foamed over it first. First protocol deep in the knit of anome to anome, I am not being seen so I should not be heard. And Morgan'd been somewhere between angry and aphasic over it, trying to figure it out. But his Oracle could've told him, could've said anything but kept him in a verse, slow build to a melody that never chimed off.

Somehow kept there in the death eyes, the forebears staring, but Dear had blipped past, and he had known, appraisal.

EVERYTHING IS BARELY MISSED (ε/ Δ)



So it hadn't had to be the Elites, but only a loneliness that seep from them, because with such an overburned psychosphere, that's the way it would go. And then, blame withers away, victims vanish, monsters hide in the unknowing dusk.

But that loneliness, he thinks, you name, you say, cancer I name you. Slipped in from somewhere else, somewhere foreign, the stardust cycle in keeping of each vented tear-drop's holy ghost. Flicker of pressure, itch of indent in passing, landfall and glisten before you wipe it away. As one does. An erosion that scalpels the toxicity out and the pressing remains in the motes, in relief, the sticky holy aetherplasm, the goodness bleeding into the Cosmere. And only the Elites would be so geeked that they noticed. Would want to taste it.

He guesses he is here to tell them that's not a good idea. But of course the Elites were shadows in Orcha Mutate, labelled shadows, this shadow looks like that, in my mind's eye.

Dear is still here. But his Alt is older now. He guesses Alts don't age through normal ways. Some ghost life event must have gotten him on Morgan's way through the wire-nest, in the end the haloic vent disfiguring within it its



extranea. It's that residue which would harden into encasement. And the pure, the sight without knowing, in interplay with the earthlight keeping it going.

Archaic but tried and true and how many of these ghost schemas would have reached Orche's tendrillants? All vibe and buzz from a distant light. The vibe, the buzz, the knowing without seeing. Rare because they're so ex-locus, the locus doesn't matter. Blind, dying thing.

But it would've fit, been how to play it for a larval EX-world. Orche is just a child and she doesn't have much time to work with. She would've just picked, from her neononic bedloam, one that worked.

She would've known that in this, the half-tethered fauna, as markers, have shelf life, should be plucked at the final prime and re-genned into a new marker, distinct, one you'd notice breezing through arcs, held over in sciving because something that didn't matter then matters now.

Running all these lives in parallax and accumulation of experience and mistake can find the sender of the true signal all at once with the karmic weight of full-formed life arcs. Dear seems breezy with it. You can process how unfair it is but that would be your point of view, and Alts



don't work like that.

His Oracle, he could put her voice to that. But he knows this is the SunNet true, the archives of all earthlight compressed through symbiosis with some spider, some crawler. Who would glean it for, past the horizon of golden light, someone taking a peek.

Some spider, he thinks, and it spiders, and it splinters. And he remembers how she had been, sage every aspect for the counsel. Hair in waxen tendrils, braids, or however the psyche halo had wanted him to see it. The compiler spools as it will and what tethers you to time and space, probing spidermind, older here, younger there, it would be just decal, painted eyes over the fuzz so much like fur.

But this is all the earthlight knows and all it has to give him.

EXILE, says the clean flame, standby for ADMIN. transmuta status: second stage, indexed as naked grub. sickness to health. nervosa; the need for warmth must not prologue final bearing. off-script contras will of course be sourced and pre-argued. welcome, beseeched, you were sought for.



come as friend and as SCHOLAR.

Dear's proven himself, he says, and his Alt mewls in tonal quaver, lent ripple by the psychelia, milk foam currents in ribbons weaving through the light and splitting it. A hint of rasp fogs an echo trail, chambered tone pulsing as it follows its groove, entimbred through the bristle and fuzz.

You can't, he says, just regen him.

you mark the details with seasons, that's how you know, and seasons are born and stretch and fade away.

By the lilt in that he had known they were Orche's words in blind repeat.

But this way, he says, it just gets built up. Stronger than it was. New face, an old name, dreamed memories of other lives but they can't choose.

Dear is silent now.

Dreamed, Morgan says, all dream and nothing else, so it flits away for them. It, you know, stacks death in the spirit. You would know if you got it that way. If you had to be a blade of leaf in the dark, cold and thirsty.



passage from EXILE brings such concern. huskshedder
variant, spirals in on stacked death. death inside itself, or
inside the shell that is,

At least, he says.

dreaming life and so death closes in, takes up space, more
weight that it needs. this variant of the wreathed finds it
in their bracing as death enters.

My Tender, he says. I ran away from it. The eyes of his
Skein are now gone with the husk but the Skein has re-
mained. The eyes, conduit for the blade of leaf, but now
I have burrowed into the earthlight, and somewhere in
there is the voice that spoke to me without knowing me,
for what is there to know for an insect hewn communal?

The eye had always seemed dead as the wood beneath the
papered trees of the Core. Now the toxicity thinks it's for-
gotten how to travel. Settles in the skein itself, dissolves
through the web, sinks away into nothing. But there is, he
thinks, at some layer something exo enough to keep my
psyche in. It will gather there.



And the space around his shivering grub, the embryonic statal breathing in the discord of Orche. It echoes, his breath, his breath meeting many breaths, all echoes of the wreathed, Orche spreading through echoes because it was in the flora to be that way.

death sickly and slow. lingers, the wreathed unable to let go. alt must emit the standard pheromonal. take priority to release you from death.

I'll make my case, he says. Who do I talk to?

The wreathed, he thinks, as if it was the flora to blame in the first place.

ADMIN permits pilgrimage to the tethered church. achievement, encoded faunic primordial, entombed promise say the wreathed. crystalline, threaded glass the noose. it swims, the knowledge of the promise, through the glass.

overlay? constraints of the chapel have been accepted, in so plaited in dead protocol and can not be broken through. the saints gave up all of their symmetry, used it to draw the sunlight into croning aearth. primer for the unprimed: this much design, to contain translates black eye on the source. revenant entropa is the source's apocheir



font. nature of the source's perspective not yet abscessed.
likelihood confluences reach bloodscript, more often than
not, that reads of refuse. so much waste when set away and
stored.

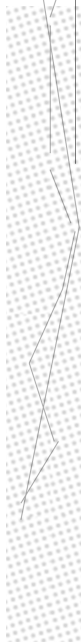
Morgan, what's left of him, without the weight of the husk.
Knotted seams, tangling through time and use. Shed at
last in the earthlight and the earthlight needs the husk,
every failed growth pattern that spiraled it further and
further from

True psyche, he thinks, or what at least glues it to your
bones, gets the vibrations through both ways.

I'm going, he says. I'll ask you something, if it matters, if
Orche can find it in her heart to spare the sliver of clus-
tersight, or however she's seeing all this.

EXILE, passage known for not asking what is allowed. fits
into the pattern, warm feeling, in final transmuta. known
that Orche feels this warmth, a steady surprise and so a
steady laughter.

He's about to ask what she's done lately, but that would be,
he thinks in the clean flame's language, EXILE :: known
semiosis (hadic, descent to envic echelons). It would be





something like that. The clean flame would want to store every variance, because the faster the exiled come around, more painless it would be for Orche.

And on that level he gets it, because it's painless for him, or he wants it that way. SunNet is already strung too tight with jealousy, bitter feuds and heartbreaks, osmosed through the leafware. How many in their Tenders and the gardens before? But his Skein, imprint of eyebed naked against the lustre, had known forever and it tells him so now that it has Orche's say-so.

The earthlight is not a reliquary for jealousies. The neonic is not meant for that storage and for the source that would be afterthought. And of course that was always fine with Orche, why wouldn't it

Can already tell, slipping into the folds, that what he's holding back all Exiles before him held back, and for good reason.

So only the eyeless, exhumed Skein hears his reply, and it ponders it, and it doesn't, for the first time, send it right back to her. For the first time, and it would loop this through. Wonder what it means, because all fibers knit into skin at some point but they have been with each other



2
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WPECENW2
G1NBBV
COMWOD
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2NM
0N12
V1D0V
W0E0V
D0G0E
E1
T0B0E
M1N1
1WC1D1D0
1E0B0V
E1D2W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11
V01B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
W0E1
211
D0G0V
1B2NM
T0B0V

for so long, in the tangle.

There is so much room, in the loops, to wonder.





NERVOSA

But he gets its neurosal burn over it, of course. Of keeping secrets. Sure route to disfigure the whole bloom. Because what it doesn't know, and what he can't tell it, is that it's not a bloom to him, but a chrysalis. A pupal stage traversal. All huskshedders would know, in the naked grub, that they were indexed that way so Orche wouldn't have to think about it herself.

And, he thinks, other Exiles, other neurodivergences, would keep different secrets.

So really the problem, if it is a problem, is worse than the exhumed Skein has even begun to figure. But he thinks if it really starts bugging out it'll just make all this harder.

Because what it also means, what he knows and what other huskshedders know, is that what may emerge may look pretty enough to feel good about sending some feelers out. Listless, forlorn earthconsciousness that thought it would die alone and unloved out in the lonely reaches.

It may look pretty, have flowered the frills, but it is still, he thinks, the same worm that for so long was eyeless and thoughtless.



And taking with him the exhumed Skein and its blindness
he passes into Etha.

Etha presses into the exhumed Skein and it drones in
complaint, its nervosa now online as hexware, bearing the
lusal wiring that lets Orche paint this around him. Include
him in it. Not knowing what it would feel like, it would
never like it. Be preborn to not like it.

And all it can tell him through the pain is that this is
where the Shine has exiled in dead skin the parts of it-
self that it hated. Into the black carapace the flaws have
ossified into and in the carapace crystal bleeding through
the fragment facets and the 'lusing overlay fed through by
the hexware. What his psyche halo contained is passing
through it.

But the 'lusing overlay itself is not dark, just shone
through by the darklight, and Dear is a ghost in it, flicker
of refractica glancing from node to node. Etha hates being
named and it's a heartskip in the skein's transference to
get it through.

Must hate, he thinks, being broken through, and the Shine
beyond will be pure, but it will have been tempered. Tem-
pered, he thinks, it will want to forget.





So he thinks that's what he's seeing now, the absence flowing over the aurics of the nodes, flowing slow, corroding it in the deep tune. The nodes are skygrey, silver glass effusing into a steady shimmer that blankets them. The silence is like a held breath, and he doesn't want to talk to the lustre again, and the lustre isn't around.

Dear had mewled when the clean flame had showed him, blanched against the charring, his rope of light. Now that he's processed it it's okay, or it's gone in the swim. Or his ghostlife, Morgan thinks, taught him silence, replaced joy with a patient faith that he can force himself through. Come out with belief, and so tease the hope from.

And he's asking the exhumed if it knows how to talk to Etha, and where he probes that there is dead silence, so heavy for a second he thinks it was there, and stripped away from him.

And it is when he is still thinking that over that he comes across the shrine, and the girl slumped against it.



GOT TEETH FIGURED OUT / THE SHRINE

As he's getting closer he feels, in absence of his grub, less naked. And he knows why, getting close enough.

She has no eyes, but that wouldn't do it by itself.

Close enough though, he sees past the sinking, further, and into pinkish red. A botched exhumation, he thinks, and she couldn't grasp it. Now, in contrast against her grubskin, the fiberstrands soaked enough for shape as teardrops, in array over her, he's seeing them glisten even as,

The Skein adjusts,

all glistens here would be whisked away at once,

and fractals are better for holding the inner facets, keeping something between the eye and what it sees.

You need a wall, the exhumed would think and so is telling him.

But against that he just thinks, it's the way it works when you combine us both. Because you need to read and I need to know, and now both of us have to process...





Half of that, he thinks, and by now maybe less.

It doesn't matter. Fractals are in bloom from the pink-red fiberstrands bristling from the twin wounds. Fiberstrands gone and the skein sets that they had been mem themselves. This way, though, it reads the weight, going by time she has spent in silence.

She turns that fractalia to flicker and cascade across him, through him, past him around Etha beyond and local. Sweeping to follow Dear, he knows. He waves, sees the milk white of his arm to wristbone, his fingers somewhere slender, dead worms. Limp, waving with the wrist movement. Aether reveals itself in a smear of glimmer, rippling from his fingers, trying to get away.

The fractals stay steady in their current, back and forth, here and there the way Dear is always around someplace, in some way.

No breath and so her shoulders are locked against the base, and around her are flowers scattered, pressed, broken up and like teeth in the array of their partings, petal splits nuzzling beneath her. Some barren and severed stems, would-be lacings mocked by the patches of dents and thorned risings, the neonic skeltered in crystal, to



be strong enough for foundation. These patches, and he sees the way they space the stems between valleys and rises, in the way the crystal glass both takes and gives light, marking each scar through echoes of itself in contrast. The scars divide them further. Even through what would be a long way anyway, if they wanted to be not scattered in their ruin, but together in it.

Scattered and gathered around their killer but all he can think, by the scarring, is, looks painful to be sitting on.

Thinks it but doesn't say it. Dear is busy talking for him. Dear's humming it out, a steady tone but strung here and there with peaks in pitch, each new surprise at where he finds himself, and he's passing it along.

"Fuck," she says, and her grub doesn't rise, but it does contort. Enough to slump her jaw lower, push a lower part of herself away into compress, convex out the part of you shown when someone is around, talking to you. "These things always come with people attached."

The exhumed Skein aches trying to get this through to him and back out in a semblance of graceful response. He knows that's him, somewhere beneath, having a problem with it. Or so it implies.



“Okay,” she says. “Eyes watching me. I don’t have those anymore.”

“They’re mine,” he says.

She waits.

“Morgan,” he says.

“Cammy,” she says. And her arms snake, then, both at once, plant, so hard into the splinters of neonic freeze that the exhumed aches again. “Well, boy, right? It’s cute. Sort of measured now, steady slide across the skips, right? Was it, he, I mean, always ”

“Less a slide and more a flicker,” Morgan says. “A waver, if you’re being technical.”

She’s gotten herself, half drag up the shrine base and half under her own grub’s power, to her feet. “It’s funny,” she says, “him flitting around and him all I can see. It looks like ”

“That’s not,” Morgan says, “how it is.” So dumb, he thinks. What do you say? I’ll have you know a spider once told me that I mattered.



“Look, I need to know,” he says. The exhumed Skein, holding the weight within it, still hurts, and it lets him know, in absence now of more context to compile. “You’ve been waiting here, right? A while. What was it like?”

“Ah right,” she says, and her fractalia flares, some signal the exhumed gets and is happy to get, waiting by now for a whole, he thinks, moment. A spray burst of iridescence, a fast pulse sequence that runs the crossings and congeals over them in fuzz. From them a glare, one hitting the darklight tangential just so, in a cillian grasping, but, he thinks, clustered, black insect legs. Spiderlines, and the fuzz breaks in the cillia, the spindling so, so honest in the sketch.

And the exhumed uses that, translates, naked grub it’s gotta get through this so honest itself.

And so he can break from the fractalia and focus on what’s around it, what makes her grub silhouette even as she’s wedged herself for more support and used that to break away from it. As she’s breaking away, saying something about how, sometimes, people she’s met gotta know how it feels, always has to know what’s getting in.

“To me,” she says, more defined as he’s taken in the whole





thing and the exhumed has put it somewhere. The shrine slab is cloven, split and threadwired, milk white gauze braided taut across and through the sieving. Without her fractalia he sees it twisting itself in loop and in the pass of braids keeping a fold of the aether, woven through from there into clung infinity through the bends. Passing glimmer rivers within them stranding into disparate knots and turns of crease, sparking motes of light in dancing current.

He thinks it over.

“Yea,” he says, trying to get it right. “Uh, has Etha tried that with you?”

“Look, void boy,” she says. Grub mouth parting so much like the way things unseam, stitch to stitch. The clinging is long and the way the lips break is violent, but all the exhumed translates is tooth to tooth.

must have seen teeth, it says, Orche’s got teeth figured out. maybe made a fix or two,

maybe,

the way teeth were out there is baser somehow. you know out there those things were only used for eating.



"I just woke up here. I have mems but not, you know, people? No context for them."

He waits. Dear mewls, low to high, entreative. She's walking to the Alt, and now that she is he can see Dear's kept himself, not still but framed, cut a locus into the aether, fragmenting through and within its limits, shaping now in that constraint a viz more solid.

Scratch, scratch goes her feet over gouged and knotted crystal.

Dear skitters for space at the last moment, but stops up with a short fade, delving into the shimmer, pressing the aether into a brace for his resonance, the held shine waxing in silver fire, and even as he waits, tranquil, the chars soon glisten dark and dissolve within the flicker ebb out, leave traces of themselves as rippling shadow in the aether..

He pushes the envic rising in himself, cyan bloodlines in a spiral flush over the grub, caught still in plume and then pulled back in clot before he remembers she can't even see it.





Remembers Orche hates it, always.

And even pushing it away he's walking to the shrine itself, while somewhere she's petting his Alt. Can tell by the faint murmur that slivers echoes of itself through the aether, finds in it strength for signal, that she's getting something through he can feel. Dead worm fingers, he thinks, trying not to care.

It looms over him, chalice and bound that way, jet black nape of her grub slanted out in fade from the edges of his sight, somewhere in BG, echoes of her kiss off his Alt.

He sidles to it.

As he does it's a weight that presses on his grubskin, a marrow flow through him and his inner bloom, laced fragrant with what could be honeydew but could taste, in a moment, more sour. Because it's grown as an echo to the wither of his outer earth shell.

Once I called that more than shell. Out there, it's lost, alone, dying.

In afterdeath of my Tender, too.

Cammy shrieks and he forgets himself, forgets he's splayed



a palm to it. Thinking Dear would've had enough and gashed her one. But looking back at where he left them he gets pitch deep fractalia, black skewed all into the corner sets.

And a glinter too, Dear's echo of hateful knowing, side-wound into them and gone not soon enough to hold him.

His grub is gaunt now, trembling, and the press of the crystal is a knifing pain, and the crook of her black lips is a helpless set. Even as she walks to him, sure-footed and steady with pressed weight.

Dear's shimmer is a veil over her shoulders, snug tailed 'cross her neck.

"I'm no expert on what you should do in here " she says, and he waves her off, but his own shoulders shake and his arm wavers there in slo-mo. She doesn't need to shrug it off, won't even give him that, and neither will Dear.

"I'm meant to do whatever this is," he says. But he winced at the 'meant,' voice breaking over it, and her optic is all she needs to shut that out too.

"Yea," she says, "some voice in here told you."





And the long silence after that slumps his back now into
the cloven slab, and the freeze against the carapacing
small of the grub sours the fragrance within to the taste
of black earth.



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BAD HAND

Cammy sings.

Her voice draws the way to the melody, stretching notes as far as she can before they rag. She times it perfect, each note born before the last reaches death. Every part streams into the next. Every part like the sap that thins blood.

And the exhumed Skein reveals a deeper facet to the ‘luse.

dealt a bad hand, the toxemia, and then the urge to cling,
simple grief translates through such closeness.

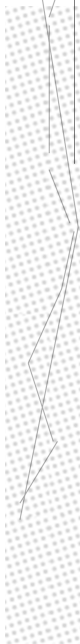
“Void boy,” Cammy says, “that’s who you are, right? Did I call it wrong?”

He can manage the ‘staking swivel of his chin.

“I’m sure something had you fixed up,” she says, “and you hated it. I never had to deal with that.”

That doesn’t make sense, but he nods through it besides. Tremor of a nod, same as the swivel.

Trying to know Etha, he thinks, like trying to know why the neuraltuned wouldn’t want to be near enough husk-





shedders to even appraise their Tenders.

All he can put into his grub is flare a streak of blood through his limbs, and knows the souring pales the grubskin against it. The translucence, the blood and what's in it sings itself through the gate of his skin.

But she lets some placid through to him, enough for him to zen and be aware of his need. Leaving him still weak, and gasping for the psychelia held and bartered by the nodes.

"But now I know," he says, "and I'm still making it to the Chapel."

"The Chapel," she says, and the roll of her eyes is a fractalia waterfall, drowning out all he sees in velvet violet, and leaving him just with the pulse that beats at the heart of his grub.



BEAM CREEPING

He tries to hold the zen as the nodes change over, but the taste of black earth is the taste of his Tender's foundation.

The nodes are now crossed stakes, their counters slanting across in asymmetry with their placings. So that any two will be reaching for the same crystallace, now smoothed over to allow spikes more jagged from their basings.

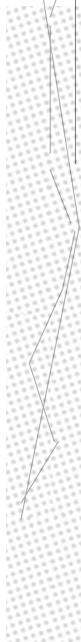
Where they cross they glow, cored verve that brightens partway across the slants, lesser on the downslope, further on the counter ascensions.

All he sees of them is a marker for every corpse still walking, above or below as gravity's pull sets.

"Stay frosty," Cammy says. She's tuned her fractalia lower, or arranged it with the exhumed Skein. Now mere diamonds that spray over where she's looking in machine gun bursts of shine.

Dear hums his assent.

All that does is stumble him, where he'd been keeping pace before, shutting out the ache in his feet. Looking down he sees tatters of grubskin spilling out, curling and





fronding, tears papering the crystal and flickering off as he steps away.

The sky is a deep teal, the node glows mere prayers, faded out before getting near it, letting a low dusk wash claim the Net except where Cammy's diamonds burn like flung candles.

He fights for and finds his footing again, at cost of the ache digging deeper, and him gritting his teeth against it.

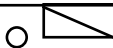
Beam of light to the east, and this one finds the sky. Bright blue, and when Cammy swerves to stare, shot through with pink like the quicks of his old, lost nails.

She says nothing, but alters her course, and by the shimmer dancing five points around her, Dear is coming with.

He follows, traipsing across crystal, moments like full wakecycles in the gnawing pain.

They stretch like Cammy'd stretched the notes in her song.

And his limbs stretch too, and the whole time Cammy's kept her shape, none of this getting to her, like waking up memdepped she'd heard her true voice within and liked how it sounded.



The blue beam creeping to tower where before it had split, in a sliver of width, the sky of SunNet. SunNet, he thinks, as if here we're all still solar, if the whole thing wasn't on life stasis, as if keeping that stasis wasn't the whole point of the black walls.

The death stares of the standstill corpses had rooted him himself, until Dear had led him forward by making up his own ground, his own space. He'd passed through and Morgan had known, can't let him go in there alone.

Except he hadn't known, only thought.

The moments had spun out into eternities and his fear had been a blissful patience against the pain. But the pain's fading now that they stand stock before the tower of light. The fractalia cores it, pumps pink through it in a furling plume that reaches long above the two, and he knows that Etha sees them silhouetted against it, that they're still within its sight, its marking ground.

Because Cammy had bent their passage to the pull of whatever this is.

Cammy with her eyes fixed on it, daring him to comment. Dear is gone, the pallor of her shoulders bared and glitter-





ing in the backglow of her stare.

It's my exhumed, he tells himself, and the tower's hue is fixed. But hard to make himself believe that, because Dear doesn't want to be around for what's happening. And even as he thinks that she sighs, long, drawn out, no song in it.

Sighs and her shoulders are slumping, and she totters in place, leaning towards him before snapping herself back the other way, and the tower is full blooded pink, as high as he can see before the light is so distant he can only make it out as a pale shine that offsets the gloom of sky.

Offsets, and then courses the sky, and there's no mistaking the spill of glow that races across it. It races in patterns, trigrams at first before more and more lines of light cartwheel the fray, the sky webbing over in this new heat.

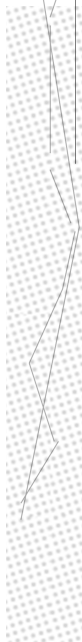
The whole sky blurring with heat until in totality the raw of undernail and light has spilled across the slanted crosses. Their own glow weak, pale and now washed out.

But against that, their need for it was fierce. Or so the exhumed tells him, as if to salve the guilt, the guilt he gets when Cammy looks at him, wretched again, fiberstrands revealed in this new light, grasping and pulling back the



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way she pulls back from him now.





ACHES WEAK

He doesn't know what to say, but feels and hears words push forth even so.

"Are you okay?" And then he needs more words, but they aren't there. Her head now hung a little lower, to match his. But all that means is that he's looking her full in her overexhused eyes.

"Are you as blind," she says. Starts, has to catch breath, her lips taut with her once-again weakness. "As me."

Then all she does is shake her head.

The tower is disintegrating, tatters of light stabbing into the psychelia and losing themselves, fraying out in tangles, tatters tearing from each other. Stranding out into the swim the way needle nettles lose themselves in skin more than they break the surface.

Soon all that's left is the pink sky in the swim and the dead crossed nodes.

Dear has flickered away again, mapping out the way he at least thinks they should go. He blinks in the distance, the distance again further off. His tempo is slower, measured,



Morgan hopes. The hush when he's not around stretches on and on and when he kills it with presence it's a mercy death, Morgan waiting and waiting for him to show up again.

Morgan follows, knowing enough by now that Cammy would be pissed if he waited up for her to shake off what she needs to shake off. But by the pad of her feet after her hesitation he knows she's right behind him.

And she does catch up by a few of Dear's blinks, which are shifting side to side now, the Alt knowing he's far enough, not getting too far just to preserve the balance between the two.

She'd go past me otherwise, he thinks, she can still see him better than me.

And he's trembling with the weight of it before he gets that it's the crystalline pulsing, not him. He's been picking the smoother ingrii, but he's slipping closer to the gouging shards than he's comfy with. He gets it when one grazes the side of his ankle, the pain spiking there muting the aches from the soles of his grubfeet.

Aches weak anyway from the chance his soles have had to





breathe.

Cammy's shaking too, wavering too, but she doesn't stop, and so he doesn't stop. Thinks about what the earrrthlight had told him, and the exhumed Skein telling him now it was the cloven slab, it made things wrong, every breath of it in the swim.

He tells it that it was just the last breaths, that the Chapel still holds his way, and when he does, and looks at Cammy, looking for strength in answer, he finds none in her fiberstrands.

And the pulsing of the crystalline through the grub is an offset that sends the sour to the ends of him.





SHIVER THROUGH

More times he should be sleeping, would rather be sleeping, before they reach the Chapel.

Massive lithic thing, the char grey stone a sinking pool for his fear of disappointment, taking it, keeping it, the way darkness keeps light, keeping it in strength.

The char grey stone against the pastel blooded sky.

The entrance was a short hall fronting the build, as if all secrets must be crawled to in cramp and closure. Dear had starred above the build in orbit, resting in final flash over its centred spire.

He'd blunk out, and Cammy had said, to be found again within.

Inside ivy spiders the stone, running through cracks and sieves. The floor is smooth and cold, drawing the heat from his grubskin. Shiver through the grub, fingertips straining somewhere below him in the dark with his arms limp before he hugs himself.

Cammy walks beside him, silent again, though he hears her trembling, the shake of her shoulders.





Thinking both could walk faster now, if they wanted to.

But it's the same slow creep through the gloom, no light here and remembered presence of the walls is all that guides them. Once or twice he reaches out to touch it, and his fingertips skate across it, without nails without sound.

His Tender is cold and dead by now.

But so am I, out there.

The hall opens up at the same time Dear blinks into the space beyond it. Timed it to their footstep on the threshold line. Morgan'd glanced down, he'll remember later, his left foot and her right, to get away from the sudden light, though it was bright and warm.

Dear's keeping his place. Full detail, the verve of his incandescence in its legia of glowing furtip standing from his sleek frame. The room around him swimming more than the psychelia ever had.

The psychelia in its absence from the room with them has him staring full on into the glow.

Even with Morgan's stare fixed the whole room flows in, like Dear is a black hole for his visual. The stone here



charred a deeper dark and the moss tracing its facadework stands out with molten-hued petals blurring chalk white in Dear's light.

Will she see it, standing beside him, because both are dreaming, and it's the same dream both ways?

Behind Dear are two doorways. Carven into the facing wall, mirrored in their size but different in their decal. Now turning his grub eyes, with effort, to take in one, the other. Knowing that what decals them is blood, though whether florid or faunic he can't tell. The left hand path is imprinted in halo with streaks like the reaches of flame. The right hand path is smeared over in blots like clouds, licks of blood into the stone.

He adjusts, shifting his weight as he gazes over both.

"Two doors," Cammy says. "Two ways to go."

That one holds his tongue, but the question presses from it after a few breaths.

"I want to," he says, "whichever I pick, I want "

"Your pet," Cammy says, "leaving me alone."



"Yea," he says.

"Here's how this is gonna work," she says. "You pick the door, if you want." She lets the silence carry her meaning to him before she breaks it. "But if you do, your pet comes with me."

And the exhumed Skein says,

within the naked flesh of the grub there is no choice.

He thinks it over. Thinks now of his Oracle, who'd spidered forth from Orche, through what passage he can't fathom. To keep him pressed into himself because, to him and her, he hadn't been ready.

Cammy says, "I'm always waiting with you."

"The left hand path," he says.



SPIDERED BY HIM

Cold again, cold and alone, the moment he's stepped through.

lightblood, the exhumed Skein says, belongs to

I don't want to know, he says to it.

you know, you've made your choice and,

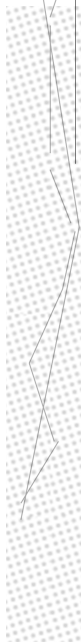
it is not known to huskshedders to be happy with their choices.

He shuts it off. Here the full glow of the mosspetals, amber and lavender that shine into and through the claustrophobia. No light beckons from the distance. Nothing to presage progress except the sound of his feet, hushed impacts like paper rustling against palm.

There was a light, he'd seen it, known it before, and known it was there within the black slab walls.

Ages ago now.

It had been too easy to give into it.





To give into the knowledge it was there, but he'd had faith and nothing else. And been assured it was the fauna, their hierarch kept, preserved somewhere deep within.

But the shrine, the cloven lith, had been too bleak, just to make the light less true.

He reaches out now for the flora. More in mass and now within his reach. Not the tips of his fingers, but the joints, rubbing into the flora and coming away dusted with motes. Motes pink into blue, shining out sapphire from rose pearl halcyon, sparse and scattered across the whorled grey.

Everlasting violet in the nanoscopic swirl.

Moving his hand away, his arm to swing by his side and the other arm to reach across and grip his elbow. Weight of his true silence presses down, gripping him to the cold floor where no groove makes his feet remember they've even touched down.

Waiting for the hall to open up again.

Before it does the moss bloodens, reaching red from the violets through the sunburnt oranges. Soon a pulse to them, the vines throbbing, vein lines sparking heartbeaten



glow in tracers of warm scarlet. The bitter through him parching him now, ready to kill for a sip of water though that's what he's never seen here.

To open myself up, he thinks, to peel my skin away and drink the bloodlight right into the bitter. But the grub, absent of fingernails, has nothing he can hurt himself with. And beyond the vines the walls are smooth, beyond the black sieveless as the floor.

Sieveless but for where the soft vines have claimed their homes.

He stops. Thinking, I could rip the vine away, and what's left would be sieve, jagged run into the stone, and then I could open myself, see what's really there.

Standing there, staring at the vine that's spidered by him. Shoulderblade height, and he's reaching for it, and he's got the barest of grip on it, eked the merest of space between it on its perch, when the bloodlight dims back to pastel orange.

And its pulse a deep throb before it stills, and he stares further, releases it, and it snaps back into the groove. And the silence after plaits the thirst, the bitter, and the taste





is the taste of refuse.

And he hears scuffling from a long way off, and moans, and teeth clicking against teeth.





EMPTY GRAVE

He remains with the other exiles.

All bloodless here, one managed to say to him before passing past in shuffle. Can't hurt the light to hurt ourselves.

He's seated, here and there sees a sparse few seated and dwelling within the massive chamber. He's turned the exhumed Skein online again, to feel less alone, sits shrouded by shadow. He asks it why he and a few others are seated while the rest are wandering. Pacing back and forth over terraced stone.

It tells him the stone is alabaster, the memory of that Orche picked up somewhere.

He waits.

huskshedders the gift of tiring, to have a need to balance out the restless maw.

He pictures his dead shell withered in the earthbound sun. Withering. By now aged twice over. Where is it, he thinks. Outside the black walls? Or will I have been returned to my Tender, neat and ordered like that, everything in its right place?





My Tender too dead to even use my body.

He asks the Skein if he's here forever and it doesn't reply. He's got his arms wrapped around his knees, limbs a basket to hold the rest of him. Watching the pacers shuffle in circles, around and around, as if orbiting their own silence. As if this way to give it breath. Life, or at least some meaning.

But what meaning remains, bloodlight effusing every inch before him and setting off each whorl, each line in each grubskin? Decay lines, he thinks, that's what each contrast means. Each crease of skin is to be a body out there.

"I'd relax," he says to the pacers, but no one listens.

Except one, after a standstill, a moment's wringing of their hands and a nuzzling of empty space into a shrug.

Moving towards him, the exhumed Skein flashing a note it wants to talk to him but only if he'll listen.

"What's your neural?" he says to the exiled thing. It stands before him, sexless and faceless but for the black of its eyes and the slitted crease of its own exhumed.



"Sigilseer," it says, in a whisper that's itself free from any id mark.

He gives it room to expand.

"There was a light," it says, and the exhumed Skein urging denotes past his bitter and into his buried psyche. Signs seen but not how to know, to interpret. Oracles tend to care less and less with them. It would get old, breathless descripts of signs that Oracles would know so back and forth that they'd be falling asleep for the tellings and still be with them in dreams.

Bites down the, usually is.

"You followed," he says. "Did you have an Alt?"

The exile stares at him. How, he thinks, they make it here without Alts, and me, just able, only just.

"But you had a Tender," he says. "We all did."

The exile dots a heart shape before its chest, between them, lofted crescents higher up and gashing to meet sloping 'cross the gaunted neck of its grub.





"I'm sorry."

The exile shrugs. Shrugging it off, Morgan thinking, the way I could never , and then sewn lips crook to meter out, quarter inch by, a harsh smile, a smile soft as the grub can manage.

"Still alive."

And as he's thinking this over, the exhumed Skein releasing fake fragrance into his core just to stand the guilt washing over him, pumped over him in tides, rise and fall, the exile turning to go, all this so much a distract from eternity's barren passage, his heartroot glints and light knives through the core it's embraced in its hesitancy.

"I kept secrets," he says. "I know you know. I know you kept them too."

The exile waving a spiral with his leftmost palm, back to him, stabbing to his right like he should turn that way, put his back on it too.

"Mine was how to commune," he says. Should be just getting it out in the face of the apathy. But his voice is harder than he thought he could ever force past his sewn lips.



“How to harvest from communion. How to keep the secret of keeping secrets, even in their sharing.”

The exile turning back to him. Other exiles have stopped their pacing, a virus of stillness rippling through the chamber. Creeping to the edges where the pacers stalk with more purpose, to complete the loops they're always only just starting.

The seated ones have their dead eyes fixed straight on him.

“Because I never found the fringes,” he says. “And no one found me.”

He dares the seated to say it, and then says it first.

“Jealousy,” he says. “And I'm jealous of Orche.”

The exile has crept back to where he is. He's forgot he's seated and as he remembers he's pushing himself up. No strength in the grub arm and no strength in his legs but he makes it up either way. Now he looks it full in the face, though it's a half-head taller, kept more muscle on its grub like the grub figured it made no difference.



The exhumed Skein murmurs in a steady cadence. The fragrance held back like it never chose to release it in the first place, like it figured it could use the stuff where it began in its gland, get the gland swollen and tender like that's good for both of them.

He thinks it might be trying to get Orche's attention.

You, he says to it, are not her highest priority, way the fuck down here in

"Empty grave," the exile before him says.

so empty, the exhumed Skein says, songs sung in graves. hopeless too, like you wanted, like i could tell.

He closes his eyes. He's alone with it, a spiral of blue light, like the bright tower had been blue before Cammy bled into it. Spiral of blue light trying to reach itself and getting nowhere, always in the middle but always starting from the trail.

Spiral of blue light in the nadir darkness of his psyche.

And isn't sure if what he says to it the others hear, if they get past the lips, and when he opens his eyes he will have to check to make sure.



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We aren't in the earthlight now, he says. That's the point of the Chapel. We're somewhere else.





CHILL WORMS

Cammy by Acheron's body, bound and strung.

Strung from the ceiling in plaited vine and in some places it's entered him, slipped beneath the skin beneath nests of petals. Petals beneath and above themselves, stacked in flatness like blades without hilts, reaching in ragged fronds, body to curve of leaf like the flat of a torn page seeking its tear.

She can't see that.

All she sees is Dear and all she hears is Acheron's heart-beat, knows the curls of the petals by the way Dear brushes them in nuzzle.

His heartbeat loud, right before her, and she's feeling along him too, hard where she thinks the sinew's taut, the muscle is gathered.

"This guy's huge," she says to the Alt. "Void boy wanted to wake him up?"

He'd want to. Caught this thing sleeping, she thinks. Where it has slept for who knows how long. Maybe he does.



Should've been him, then, but she bears no respect for this place, what it deserves, what it's done to her.

Kid's Alt missed the fuck out of him. He hasn't blunk out in a while, and that she misses, because she could see the trails, hot blue-white and searing across black space, and in the trails the shaking, the scrabbling of paws, she thought, across it all.

But now the blue-white is a nova again, compressed to a ball of glow-tipped fur that moves slow and steady across a mass she can't see.

The heartbeat slow and steady too, a dirge thudding its way to her, each beat held back like she's getting it late.

"Kid wanted to be left alone," she says. Dear doesn't listen. "Be alone and make his choice." He got it wrong, but she's gotten it wrong too, in her times, in her ways.

Dear keeps steady nuzzling the bound, sleeping shape.

But she thinks she could, is here besides.

"I want to see again," she says, breathes it out as a hiss, and Dear's ear curls, but he doesn't leave his place.



Then she's punching the held shape.

Sharp, weak, grub jabs, and the heartbeat doesn't change. Wretched, useless. Dear breaks his silence with a mewl, rough and coarse, spiking for the reaches and the tone beneath it unraveled.

But its roughness fades out to chopped whisper and then is gone. The stabs of silence at the end of it parting the sound like palm and wrist part the flow of water.

I had a life before this, before that freak told me to leave.

So when punching it doesn't work she's shoving, struggling against it, letting it know, she thinks. All my shit through this new body and into this other thing. Because I kept it back, in front of that weird stranger, and now I can't, I

The heartbeat quickens.

The new tempo about a half beat off the former pace. She stills. All heat here just the warmth of that thing and now it's slipping away. Her skin bristles, trying to raise itself for warmth, but her new skin doesn't work that way. It's settled, can't unsettle. And so it gives, and the chill worms



inside her, and finds the scent she holds on her tongue, paling out the scent of plucked orchids even further from the pluck.

So that the scent she always thought she'd lose with her breath wanes in the chill, freezes into a taste like copper, the scent reversed into a bitter shadow of itself. Copper just eking itself into her psyche, so there's that, at least.

So in the end she's no ways about it.

And knowing she should hold to that, she stops.

The thing is moving, though. Struggling against its binding, she can hear the rustling, the tremor of the vines bending, snapping back against the sinew. Rattle against the skin stilling quick, muted by their own strength and flex.

The sound fleeting in to bind her too, twining around her thoughts, torching them in their passage, and for a second the copper is the taste of dried blood. Filling her space like she's swimming in it

She slaps the thing then, three times, wishing the grub had nails for the groove.





And she's back somewhere, staring at a light, flare cutting away as she ducks her head, ducks to see it, a machine light, an unclean thing

Back again with the echo of her third slap. A low growl picking up its own echo in the room, stacking on top of itself, compressed by the cramp into a trash presser sound, one old and unfed for a choral or two.

The waste, she thinks, of all the light I can't see. Because even in her blindness it strobes across her, vibes the fiberstands clawing for something they can no longer process. The shiver right into her psyche, in patterned osmosis through her space. The kid's Alt is purring now but she couldn't have picked it up, unless she looked for the sound that came in on a worm creep frequency because all the other frequencies were taken.

All the problems, she thinks, with people, but you never see it as a problem, do you?

No, she answers for him and herself. I don't.

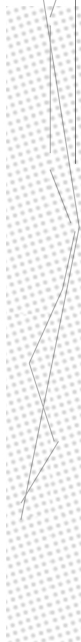
She's about to speak for Acheron, the room shaking, the

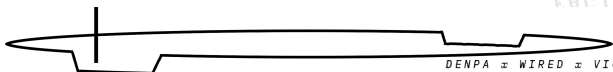


growl mixing with the trembling of the digitalis foundry that has her clutching for balance for the millionth time today. All lives repeat, and in repeat the same mistakes, she thinks, same flaws in the facets, and who I was before is me now. Off-step, off-kilter.

And who can see my facets, whose ear twitches for that whisper, whose eyes are cold enough to see it through space?

She's about to speak and then through all of it the once-bound forebear speaks for himself.





DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psycho^{gramm}a

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

by: caraparcels

PSYCHOGRAMMA

Name: saturna

Birthday: november 11

Occupation: artist, tai shu
kwong executive, moon prote-
ge vanguard

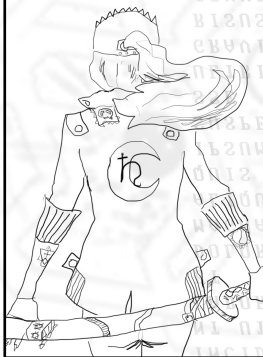
Sex: female

Blood type: o+

Likes: rivers, new art works,
abalone, urban street servers,
the moon

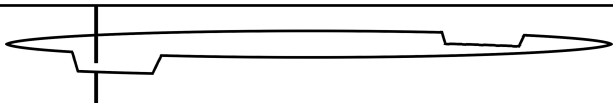
Dislikes: signal disruption,
unnecessary tragedies


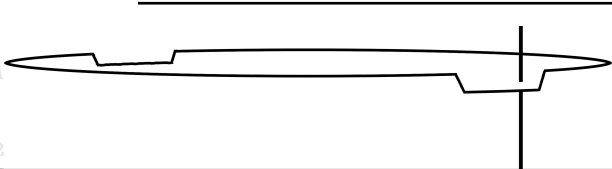
Seen with: chihaya, producer,
foxtel?



tai shu's prodigy, creating art works that crosses worlds,
times and the wired. saturna puts her entire being into
these works even risking her life in them seen by her
parted lovers installation modelling a thousand roman-
tic deaths. But she always stays mobile within the floes
of the wired. while raised with many members of the
moon protege triads, she was also trained by someone

users

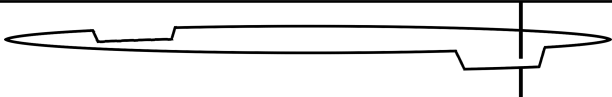


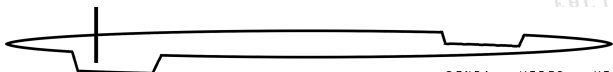


only known as (producer) and rumoured that is part of how she knows so many active users including foxtel.

accompanied by her ward chihaya, she is currently in a high ranking position which has afforded her a level of freedom from most duties at tai shu but still fulfills them if someone asks about them. this may be part of what makes her formidable as her skills in martial arts and signal manipulation through neija are exemplary rivalling assassin-execs such as hanzhou.

no records of her exist so her actual name may not ever be known.





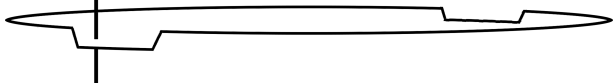
DENPA x WIRED x VIOLENCE

psYCHogramm

ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

Synopsis

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.



Last Time

a health organization known as re-volt-era takes over a residential building in the suzuru district and secret organizations begin to appear before foxtel, taking interest in their investigation.



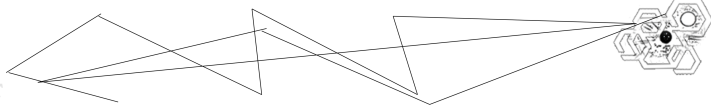
cw: violence, guns, swords, religion, blood, death, body horror

long prisms measure the length of the horizon as if each step could successfully scale another increment of the earth, the concrete my soles flattened against, limbs barely felt their flight in the cold air as i think on the rooftops from the buildings ahead, what it might be like to reach the perimeter's edge severed into the streams of wind, the blue atmosphere unbounded by lines. perhaps underneath the concrete floor, halls lit with pools of fluorescence, there teemed entries and exits that might stop a moment for brief conversation, or what of the residents riveting the bandwidth that hosted the unseen virtual spaces that only appeared as ebony lands between which the milky river of the lighting meandered. frequencies of the unseen that receded into the featureless high rises, their steel pane that even rendered the sunlight into white beams, structures that imitated these buildings in their unwavered colour.

PROTOCOL 02.3: TRANSFER III

UCCNWSV
WUECEWV
NICEBVV
COMWODO
WISNS
EBWVIDU
NTRICES
SSE
2025END
1B20W
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DOROVE
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W1 NI
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VDIB12C
10B
COM2ECI
WUEL
211
DOROV
1B20W
ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMATUM
DENPA * WIRE * VIOLENCE
P5YCHOGRAMM

2
LVCIT
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
A1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EYVAIDY
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2NW
0N12
VR10N
WVENW
DOTOKE
E1
TUBOKE
A1N1
IWCIDIDN
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E102WOD
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VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
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211
DOTOV
1B2NW
TUBEW



despite the supposed mercies of platinum torus helio, they were certainly not above watching the toils of those they've dispatched. my interface disabled, i had to remember where my residence was as i try to align remembered intersections and street layouts hoping for it to occur out of one of the streetlights, the certain placement of towers but the heat and my own recollections warp my memory weaving figures that never match the geometry of the streets i end up wandering into. in these plain districts, scarcely any crowd to walk with nor even pass the time as these blank streets only urges their passage to maintain their desolation

even if i could find my residence building, it would be difficult with a deactivated internal os. i could imagine the unit already emptied for vacancy. platinum torus helio seemed to have people everywhere if they could deactivate one internal os, causing me to dart my head around each corner before slumping down unable to even rein in a coherent thought pattern.

sunlight glares off a residential tower as if the daylight could blast the city of its unseen drones and spill these buildings empty with some warm chaos that once thrummed within us all. an ambassador sedan pulls up,





it's high pitch whine simmers to rest, becoming as inert as the world around me. bezelled glass throws the corrosive sun where the side window rolls down to the producer, hanging their hand outside.

'hey, don't you know it's dangerous out these days?'

'if you wanted me to take up superstition you should've told me beforehand'

'hmm...' the producer cocks their head before piquing their eye toward my slumped profile. 'i see, you're offline.'

'yeah...by platinum torus helio...'

'platinum torus helio?' they ask before a smile creeps upon their face. 'i get it...well, why don't we bring this story to an end...'

'what do you mean?'

'come with me'

i enter the sedan whose interior brims with electric signals that dance upon my skin as if urging me to join the unseen networks that i once was able to pour myself into. the window closed but the tint shuts out the world into



the car's interior muted engines, looming behind where producer sat in the interior, the two suits with the red bulky headsets that whirl at their mouths movements to communicate information. they sat in the passenger seats with the producer sitting beside me.

'it appears they are using heritage sites as headquarters. they do not seem to be subtle'

'regardless, the restrictions of virtual activity will limit our movements. we'll need to act fast.'

'gentlemen, there's no need to panic for now. their move only signals that we should make ours.'

'against a hermetic order? what moves can we even make'

'hmpf, virtuality extends to more than just the wired. you know that feeling don't you?' producer eyes me but my mind is blank, his words only produce a vague sensation which i cannot divine within the electrical air, my hands empty upon the seat cushions. but producer smiles, as if to say that even my lack of an answer still holds meaning. 'don't worry, we'll get you up and running again.'

the sedan's motors reverberate off what i presume to be a





tunnel we've entered, sound thrashes against the architecture and i'm told to close my eyes, the flow of my veins become perceptible tracing my contours, and i think of how in a single moment, blood could jet red arches across the darkness as my hands float immersed in the potentiality of its vigour. neurons fire up as images flash in synapses whipping into the darkness, the lights of the tunnel flash in a steady pattern, one, an image of an interface, two, saturna, three, that person who she wanted to be... a radiance pools around as motes of dust too begin to glow augmenting into the molecules of a new realm and i feel my body relieve of its heft. but producer's voice only says to keep my eyes closed.

i make adjustments inside my own os while producer leads me out of the car. i still can't tell where i am as none of my previous applications are available but my limbs are imbued with flight from static. producer tells me to open my eyes to a factory floor once occupied by century old machines, its open floors now repurposed into intersections and corridors between glass cubes where users presumably ran their operations sifting through data, moving their hands, swatting aside irrelevant reports, or circling their hands to bring in parallel information to localize yet their physical bodies remain within the glowing cubicles



whose light pooled on the concrete that rendered them as mere droplets that could never fully subsume the hard grey floor,

‘yes, we were commissioned as a task force against platinum torus helio now to be referred to as the helio group.’

we walk around the complex only for me to find familiar plants behind the cubicles next to the super silhouette car faux ordered.

‘oh, we took the liberty of reacquiring most of your things. they were being auctioned off while you were gone.’

‘wow...thanks...’

‘don’t mention it. after all, we are in this together, or should i say...connected...’

‘right...’ i ask knowing the invisible hands that producer operates by and thought better than to inquire about them. ‘how are these guys still in the cubicles.’

‘call it a bit crude but these are closed space apparatuses. while one can just set those up on the user’s avatar, this is just extra insurance, for instance, why do you think many megacorps still employ kill-teams’





'so that's the reason;' i say my breath fogs on the glass as if any more movement, air or otherwise and the person inside the cubicle would disappear.

'well enough of that. please take the elevator up. there is someone who wants to see you.'

the expansive interior of the underground factory shrinks into the bright prism elevator unit which sends me up to ground level where buildings surround with the uneven domains of the sky encroaching on the rooftops above.

the drone of virtual activity swishes in the distance but its calm waves stretch by an engine's approach. a roadster turns the corner to pull up, finned headlights soar with the long verged hood that levels to a slightly swollen rear deck with a sliver of red from the tail-light, in the interior sits a familiar maid in braided hair and glasses. i immediately kept my hands up in a half shrug despite not being armed, almost a formality that would at least foster a social relationship.

'if this is your way of empathy, i'd say it's a bit too round-about.' i mention in reference to our earlier exchanges.

'correct, i may not know that much about you, so it's better



i leave that to more qualified individuals' chihaya said.

at that statement, something closes on my neck, an uneven circle of teeth sinking into my flesh with a warmth that begins to seep with spit that was somehow familiar. turning back, the immediate motion threw off that previous sensation to a girl in a baseball cap whose brim shades dull eyes winged in white, sunrises in two different parts of a dark planet. saturna gives a chuckle perhaps intentionally breaking her innocent posture that didn't just bite down on my neck a couple seconds ago, her lips glazed with a mischief both familiar and distant as if watching it from a screen where all the glamour and colour constantly fell onto the past from the crumbling lights of the present.

'didn't expect that huh?' she asks.

'who knew that even at your age, you never stopped teeth-ing'

as a child, she would be prone to biting people if they didn't pay attention to her.

'don't you know? a person's mouth tells quite a lot too.'

'so open a buffet or something.'





'hmp' she shakes her head before getting into the roadster and i end up taking the passenger side despite her lack of explanation as she dismisses chihaya while we drive off, glimmers of an imminent sunset are dispensed onto the plazas ,catching corners of planter's boxes and steps, breeding suns across the limits of the urban geometry where lines met another, or a person might meet another, even the featureless buildings that stretched and shrank together in the windshield would lapse in the sunlight of intersections, as if these surfaces began to break into a total light that was bare of any pane of the world.

eventually we come to a stop and disembark, saturna's kicked her foot forward but as her sole met the pavement, each step became small leaps that sailed her across each throb of her shoes against the concrete not unlike a caress, fingertips sunk into flesh before gliding across it as if she completed the waltzes of the atmosphere that enlaced the buildings around us dripping with thin amber, we walk the empty streets brilliant in each vertex that savoured an exact moment of this day, even as some residents within the buildings exit, stunned for a moment at our presence before giving a slight nod, particularly at saturna whose cap and biker jacket basked in some exuberance, yet the round brim, ponytail meandering around her shoulder and sharp



lapels deviate from the uniform streetscape.

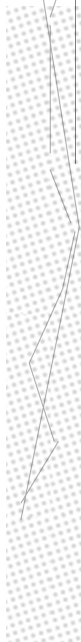
by sunset, the lights have deserted saturna's eyes as the city radiates, cleaving the buildings from the twilight and the empty street waits in its desolation. saturna slows herself now, placing her hand on the smooth surface of the building beside her.

'you know, have you seen the city when it rains?'

'not really'

'of course not, i guess...' she shrugs. 'one time, actually, there was a moment everything seemed too solid for me in the real world. only in the wired did i think of myself as being more than what i was, i could be whoever i wanted in the virtual spaces but as soon as i was back here, it was like i was trapped, these surfaces, these avenues, the rare car that passes. but then when i was walking, it started to really pour and...wow, those waves, the way the rainwater just flowed down and through it i saw the entire city twisting on the water. it was unlike anything i had seen before. no more reflections or coordinate points to be aligned.'

i hadn't been there yet. i watch a distant highrise, its glow warding off starlight as a moon shows itself out of the





retreating day, thinking in its frequencies that maintain its light, its internal signals that maintain the frictionless exchanges, could its wavelengths have stretched with an ascent steadier to the point where it began to linger.

ui elements from graphs to logos materialize out in virtual space where suddenly, users populate the scene before us with a faint breeze left to passersby and we've entered a shop server, the faceless buildings now with long windows and cheerful aisles, a parasol awning pouffed over the entryway where one user in a blouse waited, spawning in an mp3 player, the faint thump of a lo-fi beat that could be heard by anyone near her space. saturna too notices this change and she stands there, her angled lapels, pocketed hands jut out her elbows with a mischievous smirk that stops us from the commotion rushing around us.

'welcome to the world' she winked.

being back in the wired took a moment to get used to but my limbs already felt light, electric signals carried my arm into a graceful flick when i move it.

'i suppose i shall intervene.' a voice said behind and a throw of my hand to the thigh holster that spawned there aimed the vp70 toward the mage still in her archaic dress



and staff, her hand over her witch's hat both to adjust its brim and to conceal her face, her fingers that resemble the threads of fire she could employ at any time.

'hello sister samhain' saturna bowed.

'i admire your tenacity, wired detective but i fear your trajectory is misguided'

her verbiage while initially an annoying chuuni habit, the sheer exuberance of it that replaced the earlier drone was enough for me to raise the handgun and withdraw it into the holster.

'what happened? decided to move into the city?'

'your jest is rather outdated, i'm afraid, you ought to know the hinterlands are too small and that no one can elude the urban'

'if you wanted timely, you ought to show up in those corp-jackets to a megacorp . then they'll really make you be there on time.'

'once again, you display the restrictions of the wired's transactions'





‘what?’

‘come’ her hand that was on her hat swung toward the parasoled door and the two of us follow.

the streetscape fades into a vast blue although its solidity makes it seem more that we are staring at a void too solid to be sky as we are still able to walk on an invisible surface of a shape we cannot quite fathom, but this unceasing space yields with robes of light dancing above in loops and caresses less like the instantaneous hope of the shooting star than the ease that starlight brought to those wandering in the night. it then occurs to me that this is one of saturna’s art piece servers made as an antithesis to the participatory spaces that arts and performance divisions turned to trying to aggregate content off of usersbut this one was part of her small street walk on world exhibits where she encouraged users to feel lost within the space which elicited that first feeling of the wired, not cathode moons glowing against virginal pastures but the first lights that flickered in the once black screens. after-images trail samhain, electric signals maintaining the silhouettes of her past before they settle into the shape of her present self in which i sensed a moment that she hadn’t spoken in heightened words and perhaps been confronted with the



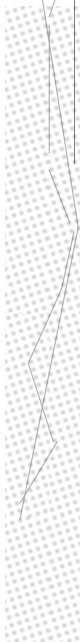
immense quiet that befell a person when they are born that did not heed to their cries even if they are cradled and assured. samhain moves her hand slow as if to slowly conduct her point within the playful comets around us.

‘i’ve said the wired is capable of much more.

‘you’re spare with words today. i suppose that means you’re serious.’

she looks away and i notice steps retreating as saturna stops a couple paces away perhaps by instruction through an encrypted communication from samhain. signals grow taut no longer tingling on the skin as the auroras above dissipate into the ether.

‘i’ll give you a demonstration.’ she spins the staff but before i can discern its rotation, signals melt her form as if the mirage from an intense heat that contorts the mage in front of me who so easily melts away, the only things remaining clear are my hands in front carved out of the blue waves before i find out i’m almost as still as a statue, capable only of slow twitches. samhain appears, the instance flashes like a last image before death until i’m cleaved from my prison, thousands of signals wink into her creased witch’s hat whose brim only gives faint shad-





ow, her bangs like tendrils from a hidden void before her attack alights on me to go on the defensive, retreat with her trajectory to dodge the staff thrust toward me, my steps flurry to evasion it's clear that she's using the bandwidth of the closed space to manipulate my perception and i must set a psychic barrier to repel the disorientation.

as she draws the staff back to slash at my torso i block it using the vp70's thigh holster brought up by my raised knee which renders me off balance until i intake breath while slamming my hands down in the air akin to a nei-ja practitioner channeling their qi which clears the once incongruous blurs into vertices, the dress sways with samhain's movements falling back to its magnanimous shape, several frills like a world of archways yet as graceful as a bough in the wind, or rather, the breeze of samhain's evasion, her silhouette clear and i set the thigh holster to open, popping the handgun into my open hand, the weapon righting itself into the three dotted iron sights, a black gate leading to a blackened strip heading towards a tower topped with a white dot, an end point of this geometric structure. the fin of the front sight like a shark before its attack falls to nothing, empty blue save for a little rumble to sound, my vision embraced in white. a bright sphere of light sears the blue and i can discern the intention of the



coming attack, penetrating my psychic barrier before a bright sphere of light melts the blue and i wrench myself into a backflip, my sole arm staggers under the sudden weight of my body upside down but i channel the electric signals that protected it from being manipulated by samhain into holding myself still, no longer wavering as i slowly complete the maneuver to stand, this being an elementary skill on the wired to optimize one's movement within it, much like being able to perform a skateboard trick every time. but samhain is able to transcend this, no longer using the wired as an augmentation but something entirely other from the smoothed steps of users flickering in conversation with bright faced avatars but changing the very way they transit through virtual space.

but given her ability to manipulate closed space to the point of freezing another person in place and potentially stripping me of all weaponry, it became clear that she was just playing with me, leaving such a showy telegraph and concentration of her magic into a single thunderstrike rather than surround me. no, it was more that thunderbolt was a comical reaction to a lesson i got wrong.

‘still clinging to the throes of desperation?’ samhain tks as i notice her reappearing behind me. ‘a battle is two





things, a physical and a psychological act. the wired makes each of them real. '

'd-duh! i know that!' i yell but i still don't know how she's able to close the distance with a mere step. while i was able to escape, i have to maintain my attention as any fluctuation could allow her psychosphere to overpower me at anytime.

signals around her twist and waver, her figure starts to blur again before she vanishes. i instantly search before i realize this lapse in attention brought my limbs to a standstill. samhain's staff already placed near my neck, the smooth shaft with the same aura as a blade.

'you know that?' no, this was never about knowing. this is about something faster than thinking. you might comprehend something but you will never truly know it unless you've experienced it not merely first hand, but in primordial knowledge. some call it survival instinct, but i think that's too crude'

the world around me blurs as if it could ignite with samhain's fires any minute, wires begin to trace onto my position and as i discern the shape of this attack, i'm already beginning to extricate myself from the hold of her signals



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B2N4
D012
V1D0N4
W0EN4
D0G0VE
E1
F0B0VE
W1N1
1WCID1D0
1E4B0V
E1D2W0D
2E1 D0
W1 E11
V01B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
W0E1
211
D0G0V
1B2N4
F0B0V

as my contours firm, and i'm picked off from it as if freed from the branches of a tree, the insolent fruit that escapes as i take back psychic territory within the closed space, bandwidth within my hands to act without interruption.

'that's it, cleave the shape of your world, user'

single pixels burn up into a bright void as if a sunrise or an approach of heaven, its light casts a shadowy beam from samhain, the one who divides the realm behind her as if a threshold, the limits of that new world. her own shadow on the ground shoots into a track that heats up like coals toward my position but stops short as i see the warping blue rise from the approaching shadow and her intention flashes in my mind. it slows from its lock-on, my own intention to attack whips toward its target, attaching the stock, a throttled stretch of black compressed into the speed of its killing intent in burst fire 9mm rounds from the vp70, not even the muzzle flash deters me as smoke from ignited gunpowder immediately sprinkle in the blue as samhain winces at her ceded ground resorts to her staff batting away the approaching bullets which must have slowed when they entered her psycho-space. the shadow that would incinerate retracts as she begins to focus on defense.





multiple arcs converge toward my position to engulf my world in flames, an attack both devastating and wonderful,. i recede into my own contours to prevent being immobilized, despite her own bandwidth surrounding me the blue clears a moment and unlike the light that's about to smite me, a tiny orb deviates from this and twirls the route of a familiar silhouette until my vision is consumed in white, a momentary flash but that causes me to flinch, saturna at my side, a star's light intersecting with another behind her as if two wishes meld into a wonderful meeting, yet it only lights a distant expression where flashes only ricochet momentary flickers across her eyes that have long ceased to affect her. but even as i'm thrown back, i manage a little smirk that this momentary lapse was all intended somehow, trying to get that barren expression into some rictus of assurance, some nod that we were on our way no matter if we were close or as distant as two strangers walking on a city street, or two users who encounter each other out of all possible connections granted daily out of virtual space.

immersed back into the closed space, solid azure reenvelops everything until it is bare of light or saturna. samhain checks her nails which accentuate the lithe grace of her hand now supine after conjuring various spells.



‘your thoughts race, do they not?’

‘i wasn’t looking for therapy, samhain’ i call back as i focus, coiling myself, i draw my arm back into a center axis relock stance with the handgun filling my grip, my other hand taking hold of my knuckle, pivoting the vp70 at an angle, the embossed blade glimmering along the slide’s frame, its tip shining forth to meet the intersection between 9mm rounds and target, ascertaining a planar of the battlefield, corners and perimeters.

samhain rushes toward me, until their image disappears , a shadow obscures my side and i shift back to avoid her attempt to knock me off balance with just a pivot of my feet that returns into the previous stance, pistol tilted, elbow juttied back, cheek pressed against the stock’s dipped forearm while my free hand pitches the firing angle hoping to clip vital points but firing disperses her to which i respond with a leap into the air to give myself a greater degree of motion, my head sidelong to anticipate where she may approach from next all the while letting signals buoy me from succumbing to gravity. an ability i anticipate samhain to know as she is already above, slicing through as i feel the presence of a blade cleaving through whatever distance, whatever electric signals were once between us.





i half think of spawning in some object to intercept but given the fresh reinstallation, i do not have any files and it might compromise my current position as most electric signals are protecting my freedom of movement and slowing my fall. denying the thought, i catch the incoming staff within the eye-shaped gap between the pistol's grip and stock, effectively trapping her weapon as the surprise allows me the strength to turn the pistol, wrenching the staff away to fire a fusillade of 9mm rounds, the spears of light graze her yet she spins through her descent like a rolling airplane as she's using some electric signals to influence her course before warping a distance back.

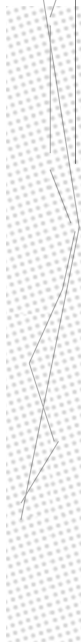
we both land with as little incident as a feather landing on the ground. her skills match her extravagant manner, manipulating every parameter of how her body moves not to mention manipulating her own movement itself. even without her staff, she warps next to me, negating the range advantage i would have with using a firearm as i would pivot, rotating myself out of her strikes, a flat hand jab toward my throat blocked by my forearm, the vp70 a dominant vertex of the lance formed by enjoined hands, not compromising its structure whose tip continually parries her movements, coordinate points catching the lines and arcs of her strikes. she then retreats suddenly as if know-



ing even by hand to hand, we're just about even, instead opting to fight as she had initially: fire with fire.

'your agricultural manners continue, good. at least you won't go quietly'

planting my foot back, i place my hands forward, curled as if to grapple. to this, samhain responds as her robe wavers in an unseen breeze before she disappears entirely, closing the distance in single steps that launch her forth. rather, more that her steps only regulate a movement too fast for one to see like the speed of light reaching a person from its star. just how does she attain such speed? isn't the fastest path between two points a straight line? if the shape can be broken down into points by getting rid of the path, it would move from something outside of geometries itself, the thought imagining its shape from these seemingly disparate coordinates. were there not car rides that would elapse faster if focused on reaching the destination and everything would melt in congruity to that prized plaza? the first time i entered the wired when i was young, the perceived limits of the earth from horizons that slit my vision into the unseen and the reach of my limbs tethered to my body all trembled from the volume of static pouring into blue where the flat surfaces of indoor spaces





around me gave to an expanse, electric signals now urged me for the second time through these polychromatic polygons that could soar past waning silences, this was a realm where i could move anywhere i wished, just the flash of an idea could materialize out of the thrumming air, even the self i could be suffused with abstractions trying to grasp at its contour. she draws near, where her footsteps make contact appear in my mind and i think of where to position myself, closing this with a single shot connecting her next step and mine, a cataclysmic polygon complete.

taking a step, the ground disappears a moment and my next catches the fall from already with legs spread to a firing position as i already twist my hands in position to spawn the g3ka4 battle rifle, the plastic foregrip slides across my fingers, an olive beam shining from the mechanisms assembling in front of me towards the orange petals muzzle flash, oared stock crashes against my shoulder leaned in to absorb the recoil from the volleys of 7.62 rounds. rays from imminent stars illuminate trails of smoke, sound returns in acute reification, the surface of noise that envelops the closed space sinks into the wavelengths. despite this calm i nearly topple over, the movement somehow getting me lightheaded, my attempts to focus again further sap the ability to keep myself upright, already fearing she



would immobilize this as my mental activity is drawn away from maintaining a psycho silhouette.

but samhain is gone, rather, she has passed me and in doing so, her intention to attack relents as i am now a considerable distance away from her. was this the wish upon the shooting stars in neural activity granted into the electric signals now able to move an entire body at any point in this virtual plane without the work of steps and looped animation?

‘hmpf, not the way i expected the step transfer to materialize but that is it nonetheless. you’ll have to think past making the battlefield so geometric’

‘a battlefield has its mind and spatial properties...oh that’s right, i guess that kind of thing doesn’t concern you does it?’ i ask her, the jest knowing that the battle has concluded.

samhain sighs twirling her staff.

‘everything, even our bodies are made of electric signals. our internal os’ and our minds can manipulate virtual space. the only reason that we cannot do so as often is due to the restrictions in place for public servers not to





mention the psychic strain it could have on someone. but the transfer process can also be applied in short distances within the same space. you really are an oaf if you didn't know that'

the prospect made sense but to think my movement could be one of flight from a mere idea and a step forth falling into the next from a greater distance is already enough to dissolve into the vibrating signals that could now await my next steps within the blue realm. although more of my silence just comes from the fact that she just insulted me in plain speech which seems much more egregious without her stylized speech.

before i can do anything, the closed space diminishes in solidity relenting to the robes of light interweaving around us as an aurora all while saturna returns next to me.

'are you done doing things i can't see?' she asks, her inquisitive expression wide enough to perhaps see the lewd tinge she added to her question.

'we were doing nothing of what you can imagine' samhain turns away, closing her eyes to abort the image.

'of course, for a mage on the wired, you certainly still have



yet to read someone's mind' saturna gives me a knowing glance. a gesture that somehow bothers samhain who stifles her annoyance by placing her staff on her shoulder.

'well, i must resign from today's affairs, moderating for tai shu is not an endeavour so simple' she says before she logs off, vanishing as she would in battle but to another server space, yet her log-off sequence dispersed grains of a glimmery powder as if from a departing ritual.

'so who was that, i would ask'

'why, samhain works as an admin for the new central branch for tai shu i would say'

'well, at least i would know you to have a handle on everything, even when i'm in danger'

'of course,' she said, a satisfied smile at an expected result but it falters, 'your life wasn't really in danger though.'

'i guess i should be relieved that these megacorps are overseen by chuuni's and wild killers'

'it takes a special kind of fucked up to be up there you know? the rivers and lakes of heaven reflect the majesty of the afternoon, yet they diverge as they bloom' she pac-



es metronomically to recall that old passage . the orbs of light once solid trail begin to melt into faint pulsations, a ghostly halo corrugating in the azure beyond as if submerged in water and we stand upon a disc solid among the fluctuating waves eddying around us, images and connections, her stroll continues its leisurely steps, two half beats of sole and heel

before she stops to extend her hand. i look at it a moment before placing my own, fingers embrace her palm with a warmth she knows makes me a little uncomfortable. this is a way to link internal os' but she mostly used it for one of her art pieces where the viewer joined hands with a person who was the artwork and began to explore landscapes of different textures based in the personality of the person, a living work of art, the human no longer constrained to sociological and cultural aspect but the psychosphere to which their thoughts and art might appear yet before finding form. however, she'd also establish this linked connection in secret as kids as if discovering interiors ourselves only we knew apart from the ruckus from other kids and the commandments of adults, trying to spawn things in virtual space as the static would bathe our unmoved limbs and we did nothing but stare. 'come on, producer wants to see us'



a bright doorway forms at the connection and walking with her, my vision consumed in white, as if entering an afterlife and trying to grasp for surface, yet as i turn my hand, i hope not to feel earth, or surface, and i was relieved that saturna's wrist was still there in the void. she always stood there amidst empty cities and even as the server spaces grew deserted and our thoughts couldn't produce anything more in virtual space we would still be there among all the possibilities that could've been granted out of electric currents.

upon our transfer, we enter a large hall in the real world, its surfaces blasted smooth, white circular tables populate the space but no chairs surround them to anticipate the arrivals from a wayward crowd. rather, these apparatuses are host satellites that users would gather to transfer into the wired which were converted from restaurants. a remnant of real public space as this is merely a node port where users can transfer between here and the wired which assured some anonymity in the same way as being in throng of office workers in a plaza appearing suddenly in it and darting off to unseen avenues.

being there with saturna, i half wondered if we'd wait in line for a table or if she might enjoy this kind of thing,





our enjoined hands may have conveyed this thought but it does little to stir her. from the half-darkness, producer emerges and the space ripples with electric signals dancing upon our hands, illuminated by the interface from the internal os'. this gathering was familiar as many times producer would assign us casefiles when they were still my case handler and insist we stay a while in dark unconnected spaces such as these where no one would seemingly know our presence, that like the walls around us, enclosed our conspiratorial conversation from the world with a solemn presentation within the silence and empty panes.

'right on time' producer nods.

'when'd we become a comedy act?'

'well, everything has its time to appear, a well timed laugh, a kernel of truth...'

'now it seems like we're in a movie' saturna shrugs to me, thinking on that medium where time moved in specific accordance to a separate world rather than it settle around a person. that it was a palpable movement exterior to one's self constantly moving forward in perpetual montage.

'yes, the picture-esque couple, their love is what wreaks



havoc on the sterile world' i wasn't sure about this image that producer shipped us into but then, we always joked before that producer was the parent in the relationship so i suppose this was just nostalgia, albeit a horribly outdated one. producer then claps their hand to signal a change in topic in a theatric way. 'so, who's ready to work?'

'what's on admission?'

'we're going to raid castle forest and pick up a broker we've fingered as a platinum torus helio member. they're waiting castle forest to drop a stock from crineberg following their recent acquisition of a building in suzuru. tai shu and crineberg have both agreed to manipulate the building's bandwidth to make the raid as stylish and in our favour. call it a personal playground.'

'what does that have to with stocks?'

'don't you know? to play is much more potent than to work. working has a connotation of resignation but to play is much more total in its ability and has greater potential to transgress, or should i say transcend' producer winks.

'drop the system? it can't be so simple.'





‘oh such wishes are quite potent in a person’s imaginations and it can be done through the wired were it not for virtuo-moderation systems. but you still ought to make it look realistic. maybe someone will really think their company’s in trouble.’

‘right,’ though despite this affirmation, a faint ripple can be discerned from the signal blocking properties of this server hosting terminal and despite it seeming like on the wired, there may be thousands of users wanting to load in, i could only think of that faceless figure who stood on the pastures akin to optometry tests where looking closely, i might begin to distinguish them. . ‘what about the luminous king?’

‘the luminous king? you mean revolt-era’s deity?’ they ask but the incredulity of bringing up such an entity in this context aborted my attempt to ask further

‘oh uh, nothing’

‘i know it’s an odd phenomenon, if anything, maybe they’ll think the luminous king is making an anti-corporate statement haha’ they laugh. typical producer. always can sweep any tension with a laugh that made even the most egregious error seem simply trivial.



producer routes a connection from an elevator at the back of the room that saturna and i take. saturna opens her palm, a slender sheath carrying a wo dao slices into the milky air of the elevator where she takes the weapon in her hand and withdraws it to her back. a black type 54 pistol spawns in the other, the slide's length curves back like a blade thrusting back on its tracks to eject its 7.62x19mm round. the muzzle ringed the larger barrel and the thin guide rod where the smooth profile of the slide chisels before meandering to the trigger guard and the wide slab of the grip canted toward saturna's hand that grasps it, fingers on the black star insignia her dimensions even flash a moment as she changes her shoes into thin slippers which had since become a classic yet formal style in the eastern office culture.

'you wanted to ask producer about something' she mentions the earlier exchange. she knows me long enough to know my aborted attempts at anything usually result from unsolved impetus.

'sort of...i- i wanted to ask about the luminous king because i've been seeing them the past while. maybe after the shutdown earlier, maybe they're gone but still...'

'hm. sounds less like a king and more like a deity. not the



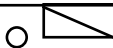
kind a person worships but more of a potent yet invisible being.'

'i don't know if we should be courting superstition'

'you're right. let's call it speculation instead.' she smirks but it dissipates. 'still, i think they're hiding something'

while this could hint at suspicion, we leave the thought as she makes no indication to continue it further. it always seems that any person has their faces they would not show to others, including producer, their inviting laugh putting everyone at a particular distance.

the elevator doors part, framing the atrium of castle forest before the cubic dimensions of the unit expanded into the hexagonal decked upper levels, a waterfall babbles by a fountain surrounded by large rocks where a few clerks sit down with freshly toasted baos and lattes but say little to each other, sometimes giving cursory glances which indicate a private communication. rather, all the office workers that flicker around us barely make any conversation that would err from the sounds of elevator units or water rippling from the fountain. we seem to have entered a sublime ambience akin to a mass that divines the business that flickers in electric signals by nature and invisible ma-



chines.

<wonder what their real office looks like>

<does it matter? this is simply their abstract beliefs and values made real. no wonder their stock is doing so well at the moment.>

our interfaces notify us of a meeting with the broker whose username is labelled as geminis. our play is about to begin as we make our walk to their office as we would their real one, a sign of respect among the wired business culture. it seems that geminis wants the privacy their office afforded.

geminis is an unassuming broker with a tightly pressed suit and blue rimmed glasses with skin tight around their face indicating a man of sports outside of the office, virtual batting cages, albeit that appearance is probably intentional as much of the dress-code was flexible depending on the aesthetic of the impression but also the market or user they were trying to attract. he opens a stiff hand toward their office whose glass and metal walls were comforted by wooden shelves and a carpet, a variety of brain puzzles sit on their desk, half solved and tipped over as if they won't be level until every piece is congruent with the flat surface.





‘welcome wulei and ...ziyi’

‘yes, thank you.’ saturna takes the lead immediately walking the space to examine the shelves. ‘you have a keen eye for the natural it seems. abutting the corners makes for quite the flow here’

‘i must appreciate your observation. i have had this set up by tai shu’s very best in spiritual matters. business is not just about movement of capital. it is the movement’

‘our philosophies have much in common it seems’

during this conversation, i scan through the documentation that producer sent for our cover and here i begin to ask.

‘i think our roles as a small and large business should have a similar train. this is what makes one successful.’ i say, attempting to mimic the rhythm of the conversation in its assertions and faux-grace that always dance around the subject.

‘this is why i think our businesses will make a great collaboration. i’m glad to see individuals applying themselves in this day and age. business will always be business right?’



geminis breaks out, a clap of their hands dispelling the initial air as he spreads his arms out to embrace whatever electric signals are at hand before raising his hand near his desk, a cityscape emerging in the center. 'in this city, there's much virtual activity but there's a saturation in market. where you want to invest is in the private mining and steel trades. they're just like us, trying to make a living within these times.'

'physical labour in this time huh?' sounds like a rarity'

'right? i love those guys' he laughs assuming some allyship with the pursuing and the tired, chipping their tools upon mounds of rock. as the conversation went on, saturna (or ziyi) handle many of the accounts asking about castle forest's investment plans, returns and other related fields as i await whatever signal was to commence our raid.

'so i believe with the shares in our hands, your company will be in-good company'

'oh, i think that's just lovely isn't it' saturna turns to me in an affected way, her hand on mine, a signal notifies me that it's zero hour and a smirk breaks from my once still form.





‘certainly’

facing the rear of geminis’ office, i’m now behind him, his moment of shock allows me to set up a closed space, overwhelming his psycho-barrier to pin him onto his desk, vp70 handgun down onto his temple. if i can maintain this hold, then a walk to the nearest elevator should take us to the exfil already prepared for us.

the server space is already on alert status as we exit into the corridor, a squad of tai shu military in combat boots and body armour march into firing position where their rounds are already projected to rip apart everything within 800 m. saturna draws her type-54 and fires, muzzle flash barely stirring her rigid expression as the 7.62x19mm rounds punch through body armour, their position compromised as they scatter to spawn riot shields as they return fire, each volley of automatic gunfire curves away from saturna who employs a strong psycho barrier enhanced by tai shu’s and crineberg’s manipulated bandwidth.

with her cover fire, i move into a common office and fire into the air as clerks all scatter, some disappearing by logging off with an image of frozen shock, the sounds of gunfire already enough to jar them from the once calm office work which clears like forgetting as i surge forward



with geminis in front of me and two security officers, one i dispatch with the handgun before i realize i'm exposed at the side, forgetting to turn my human shield toward them. i throw geminis to the side, breaking the other way sliding beneath a row of cubicles where i shoot out the light fixture above the security officer, shards occupy them long enough for me to circumvent, folding the line of fire by moving around the cubicle that places them right before the surface beside shoots to a clear range where the security officer already fell by the vp70's burst fire volley.

geminis with some degree of movement restored from my lapsed concentration attempts to log off only to have his access blocked. taking him to the center of the building, i approach the deck where three figures soar up in the air, brushing the gardens that lined the railings. saturna flies through the air along with two others, one in qipao with a large saber and the other in a long coat spinning a chained sickle. they must be tai shu's apex in combat judging by their manipulation of qi and virtual space. saturna's ascent slows as her sole touches down on a set of signals used to propel her leap towards the martial artist with the saber. her wo dao clashes with the saber but with its descent, saturna is at the disadvantage working against gravity yet, she gives to the attack, swinging herself around, her palm be-





coming a blur with only a visible gesture of prayer before it strikes down the nape of the saber wielder who tumbles down into the atrium.

the chain wraps around saturna's ankle. a sensible approach to topple her balance but it does little to deter her course as she lets the chain wrap around her leg with the sickle fast approaching like a sliver eagle looking to dive on its prey.

yet this fate is not to be, saturna takes a stance, wo dao pointed askew toward her assailant as she stops her fall with her free hand out grasping both electric signals and qi. the chain slackens from the sudden loss of gravity and the sickle user, also a neija practitioner, detects the change in intention as saturna slashes the wo dao, energy ripples through the building threatening to melt all urban geometry in its wake and shreds up her attacker until they are forced to log off leaving a broken chain.

saturna lands on the atrium's lobby littered with fallen soldiers and riot shields broken in half. i meet her downstairs via the elevator with geminis whose reaction to all this i can only imagine. the entrance opens up, a wave of soldiers and riot shields surrounding as if waiting for our fall, yet a figure walks in front of the gunners, placing their



hands on the two rifles beside him as they lower them, indicating that this is not a fight of simple suppression.

the individual wears a mask at the side of their head as if another face that turns to the side and chuckles. sunglasses glimmer of fluorescence and their suit is slightly pouffed, less to do with a straining formality than the comfort of their grace enough to have the soldier behind him stare.

‘well now, i don’t suppose you were looking for a quick ending, saturna...’

‘i was just wondering what took you so long to appear. i was beginning to think you were belittling me, hanzhou’ she smirks.

‘your moon protégé division causes too much trouble for my liking but given they have ragamuffins like you in their ranks, i should expect this now. even if we do work for the same company.’

‘really? i just think the future looks different between us. it’s a bit more abstract than schoolgirl idols.’

‘our futures chased each other since 80 sects and moon





protégé fought years ago.'

'really? then shall we have at it again?'

her bravado stills as if her cavalier attitude melted into the blade, its lines and dents as she holds up her stance, wo dao slanted as if to slice the flat ground which they both stand on with a glimmer.

'you really have no tact' hanzhou spits as he draws a short but wide knife with a wiry design lacing from the hilt, a weapon used by wing chun practitioners. his stance haunches on the ground with a single fist, the chiseled arm tensed under his suit already hinting at what damage it can do. but in that hand when he opens it, a short pistol, a type 64 spawns, its fat rear grip fitting his palm with only the sharp tail and circular muzzle pointed out of his grip.

their qi and psycho-barriers tremble at the space, even the garden boxes quiver and a storm is conjured within the fountain. hanzhou twists his foot to begin and saturna draws her sword back ,her palm a retreating wave from a shore to accept his challenge.

he balks at the idea of a charge by firing the type 64, saturna brings up the wo dao, the side of the slender blade licks



2
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EYVAIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
D012
V100V
W0E0V
D000E
E1
FVBOVE
W101
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D000V
1B20W
F0B0W

along the course of the approaching 7.62x17mm round before her first step warps her a couple paces to the side spinning behind a pillar where she draws her type 54 and returns fire. hanzhou looks like he's standing still but as soon as i blink, he's already dodged all of saturna's shots and enters her radius and in that moment, i thought i saw knowing smiles flicker on their faces once their blades clash, the reverberation an ancient shriek that pauses the observing soldiers where they do not notice hanzhou uses the point of their swords meeting to thrust the agile type 64 into saturna's stomach but is thwarted as her palm bats away the gun, firing off course as she uses the momentum off his wrist to spin into a side cut that could decapitate her opponent who simply blocks with the small blade twisting all reflections. blades locked, they can only spin them trying to shove their pistols in front of each other within that melee. saturna's type 54 locks back empty as if a knife disarmed, not knowing hanzhou set his intention in virtual space to sneak through her psycho barrier and empty the weapon's magazine before she faces the bore of the type 64, its flash only covering the left periphery of her vision as she tilts her head. the bullet grazes her.

this movement is enough to give room for hanzhou to push her off balance while their swords are locked but satur-





naunlodges the wo dao and stabs forward, its long blade forces him to pull back, swords freed. the soldiers around ready their rifles as if to claim the moment saturna falters but hanzhou spreads his arms out, signaling them not to move as if their opportunistic desire would sully the exchange they are entrenched in.

a trickle of blood runs down her cheek and she licks it, savouring the taste of iron and spent gunpowder with a rictus of delight.

‘impertinent child...’ hanzhou curses. saturna spawns a magazine but that makes enough time for hanzhou to appear in front to claim her life with the large dagger aiming to plunge into her neck but she brings down her pistol, the empty space within the grip catches the magazine and pivots, her forearm catches his bladed hand and traps it flat on her stomach as she double taps two shots that narrowly avoid hanzhou crushing buttons on his suit jacket. before he can ascertain his weapon’s sharpness with killing intent, saturna releases his arm that tries to cut her stomach but she already kicks herself backward firing towards hanzhou who, perhaps overwhelmed, deflects the bullets off his blade using qi to redirect their course like she did earlier. their exchange of gunfire punctuated



in swings and thrusts depending on their position as if parrying in a fencing match, each wave of their weapons countering the other. saturna even reloads her weapon, a gesture that while unneeded given the unlimited ammo that could be granted on the wired serves to merely re-orient herself from the vectors and forces with the click of her weapon's action, the chamber of a round. but this reprieve is too long. hanzhou enters a place too close for her to react.

'game over' he whispers before bringing his blade up, tearing through in a fatal gash that was neither beautiful nor grotesque as if the gesture was just that. a single movement that ended the life of one behind it.

looking at the body, hanzhou relaxes staring at the work he has done and thinks of withdrawing his weapon to take care of this business. but something tenses behind him as if aware of a presence haunting his back and when he turns to reveal it, a wo dao cleaves down on him, his instinct to defend bringing both his pistol and dagger to attempt to hold off the strike but the amount of qi, not to mention shock at his opponent's seeming resurrection weakens the structural integrity of his weapons which give way allowing saturna to cut him down, blood spraying





cleanly to each side like red lapels.

‘did you really think you could catch me with a maneuver so predictable’ she chides with blood dripping from her lip and the wound still ripped down her shoulder. this was a technique she had used in her piece called afterlife eros where she used her own body and duplicates to create the specter of deceased lovers, one that now dispenses its moonlit attack upon hanzhou whose brow quivers at the sight.

he still has the energy to back off out of her range but it is clear that he has lost his advantage. saturna isn’t completely unscathed however as his attack did indeed connect but through the paroxysm of the blade engorging her flesh she was able to fuse both a flash transfer and load a duplicate corpse the same way she did in her gallery piece, one that many spectators thought evoked a celebration of life but such a ritual was performed due to her own scars and using the contact between weapon and flesh to form different silhouettes of slain lovers.

the only weapon she can wield reliably is her wo dao, the pain having dulled her senses and her wounded shoulder rendered the respective arm barely usable. many anticipate a decisive attack but everyone stops moving as a com-

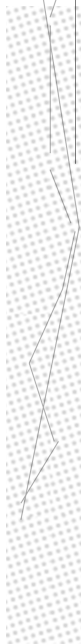


munication filters in from tai shu, one even i am privy to that signals the end of our symphony.

hanzhou hurls a sigh of disgust and saturna smiles upon the end. the soldiers all retreat, hanzhou bats away the medic team preferring to heal himself and we enter the elevator, the once clean lobby warped with the dents and gunshot holes, images that would be taken and sent to producer.

saturna leans on the back of the elevator unit, a streak of blood from her falling shoulder but she controls her breathing, invoking some qi to null the pain. the sight of her still trying to maintain that expressionless face, eyes dull to any death that flashed in her was enough to prompt me to place my hands around her shoulder to try to stop the bleeding. red seeps through her jacket and my sleeves dampening my arms forearms, as if her bloodied shoulder supported my hands in a prayer within my interlocked hands trying to form an arch that could bear her pain.

'is-is this-which body is it that i'm holding onto...' i ask, almost hoping for her to reappear just fine. instead she raises the hand from her wounded shoulder and places her hand on my face, the heat emitted from it cooling from the blood which leaves a streak upon my cheek yet





smoothed her touch even as her fingers clung to flesh. almost not wanting to let it fall, i dive to catch it hands still on her wound until the hand is in my mouth, she winces a moment but it clears into an almost knowing smile. our interfaces didn't connect here yet i sensed a faint twitch from her that soon settles into the soft throbs of her heart now regulating her bloodflow.

we arrive, tai shu and crineberg soldiers extract geminis and chihaya recovers saturna to heal after shoving me out of the way as if to reclaim her rightful place as her assistant.

i see her blood splattered on my sleeves as if an emblem apart from the smooth surfaces of the real world.i only keep it on as producer finds me.

'what a show'

'what can i say, it's hard to know when you're in the show or just another audience member'

'hmph.' producer smiles as they rotate their palm transferring me information reports about the security scandal within castle forest and watching the recorded footage of the raid from saturna entering a shell of riot shields all of



them getting cut to bits from inside by her wo dao, and my clearing the common office by firing into the air. investors pull out due to a risk in their infrastructure. the whole affair as vague as the sensations from previous now in this stylized form before me.

‘play and work in action huh’

‘platinum torus helio is now in disarray. losing one of their main supports is huge. we already have some defectors coming in. on that note, there’s one i would like you to speak with.’ they usher me to one of the cubicles already seating me in my next role.

i enter it and the warehouse space disappears into a rustic café, lights pour from conical plates suspended off a wire from the ceiling. wooden tables gather as if in morning shift not yet disheveled from departed guests. gold engraves the wooden walls, a getaway from the toils of work . the window shows looping footage of men climbing a hill digging into a mountain while others move planks and a saw mill moves raw material down a conveyer belt.

‘beautiful isn’t it?’ said a voice. the owner of that voice is a slightly gruff man in a white suit inflated by his toned muscle, the dress-shirt however creased as if despite his





stylish attire had been subject to long repetitive manual labour. he only stares at the displays of effort outside. 'looking at something like this just really makes me feel alive'

'perhaps you should retreat to some cottage somewhere. i'm sure there's server spaces for it.'

the man unrolls his sleeves. his arms glisten slightly. a body whose muscles were the sinews of a river that nourished whatever energy he devoted to setting up this haven of leisure.

'i can barely feel the sweat on my arm. this work' he said before something breaks in his expression, rendering his pathos moot. 'you know, a market used to be about the exchange of goods. one place moved to another. then it became about ideas and signs. now, we are the ideas and signs'

'isn't that part of a person? we express things and ideas all the same'

'yes, we do and now it is all that there is, ideas clashing ideas in literal form. but if you can tinker with something from the real world, you could be well off. but i suppose



this is no longer the case.'

i can sense that this was going to lead to some zero sum game that dismissed the world for its inherent miscreance, deviating from all forms of order, only capable of the wanton.

'that doesn't matter to me. i'm simply here to finish what i started.'

'see it through to the end?' how noble of you'

'better than to half heartedly throw the world away.'

'hmph, you are similar to us too. that's why unlike many other users, you still carry a battle rifle and handgun to the field. not many would still retain this sense of...valor'

'valor huh,' i thought imagining some statue or arches and laurels, all this past shorn off into faceless cities for all fantasy was submerged into virtual space, wavelengths that can be spun into anything at all. 'they're at the manor aren't they?'

'information is still just information'

'and what of the luminous king?'





‘them? they’re just a fairy-tale but i hear they only appear to the most dedicated of pursuits. they’re a body that still remembers our shape even if they have no face.’

‘thanks, i’ll keep that mind’ i tell him if not just to cap off the conversation. i re-enter the warehouse from the door behind the café where the pleasant atmosphere and bleak windows relegate into concrete totality. even the trusses above that support the arched roof are hidden in flat ceiling. the glow of the cubicles intensify now as many users get to work on moving trade, stocks and spinning narratives, the transactions of the real world that everyone would wake up to. the mechanisms of tomorrow. producer only sits on a bench staring at the hyperactive doings, letting the commotion pass without being swept up by it, only letting the light flash across their face as data is moved from one part of the wired to another, much like staring into an aquarium, a blue glow reaches from a glass barrier, one they can see through yet kept apart.

i sit beside them and set up an encrypted line.

<how’s saturna>

<she’s fine...given the fight was across the wired but the psychological damage was not severe. her neija heals up



quick. you know that she's quite the practitioner in chinese medicine.>

<right...>

<that said, i am sorry that she got hurt. i should have realized that damage across the wired can still transfer. it is my responsibility that this happened>

<you can tell her when she's healed>

<i will...>

producer turns their head searching among the crowd of agents and data collectors running among the glowing cubicles, their shadows fanned out, endless days passing through them, frantically searching through for the future.

<i found out some more of platinum torus helio is hiding in their manor from last time>

<they are ones to make a final stand aren't they. but from what i gather, only a few senior members have stayed there>

<sounds easy enough>





<the real world can become as abstract as the wired does, and so the past always grasps onto the tomorrows, whether it's the same streets or the same people. maybe that makes it more important that we find a way to confront the end of these eras. perhaps platinum torus helio falls not by a severance of their circle but a clatter of their rings. if data is mere abstract, then, so can the material. just where is does all that effort go to? maybe it melts dying across in the way a morning sun does, maybe a world that is no longer dependent on our beats to turn it>

<a ceremony? that's a lot to think on, the death of others, and the death of oneself.>

<this world does have its ways of completions. the old world is simply an image as were their ideas of it. all of these different worlds have their own mass over us.in any case, be careful...>

<i know what i need to do>

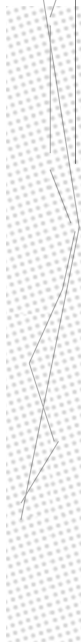
at this, producer gives no further protest and stands walking to me and places their hand on my arm in firm but comfortable grip. our internal os' didn't connect but his hand lingered a moment before letting go, fading into the crowd racing by, melting his form in swarms of data and



stock delivered either in footsteps or the virtual space
ebbing the warehouse.

arriving at the manor's outskirts, i am given body armour
and a virtual space egg that has a mirage capability to con-
ceal my movements in after-images as well as equip night
vision. foliage brushes in the wind as if to rouse them for
this happening to take place where i walk forward, meld-
ing with the tall grasses. the manor's exterior is as expect-
ed, laced in cornices and eaved doorways with iron gates.
there are laser trip mines around the doors except for the
back entrance waiting for any would-be intruder to step
inside. with no bandwidth coverage, i am on my own with
only the half moon illuminating the house.

waiting to enter through the backdoor would be a bore,
reducing the fight into endless unfolding of the manor
walls to expose the enemy. i stand in front, nvg's scan the
house in grey as if imagining it as a relic before detecting
no hostile snipers. i see the main door and run towards
it, drawing the vp70, a black blur rights into the three dot
sight, hitting the corners of the door to disable the mines
before kicking it down like a holographic warrior come
to wreck havoc on the old estates of columns and arches.
moonlight is swallowed up into a dim ceiling, a flash trips





and my interface disappears as electric signals die out on my limbs but i don't let this stop me as i thrust the vp70 one handed to the right entrance unveiling a long sitting room before swinging the pistol toward the left entryway, where my other hand catches it, tilting to a center relock facing a dinner hall, the tension quick to subside but i try to shake this lax feeling off as i spin forward to press down the hall. movement weighs on me so i have to be careful even with body armour.

the corridor opens up to a wide kitchen. an island counter at the center allows me to frame the area, where i check two entrances on the sides for contacts before i slide over the counter taking cover between it and the sink where a sole window allows moonlight to glimmer off the faucet. this position seals up those two entrances with solid wall, each corner of the island now a possible kill-field all just at the edges.

there has been no movement yet when i peek above the counter. the rooms from the two entryways look almost exactly the same which is odd given the floor plans said the dining hall and sitting room were as long as the entire first floor. couches face each other from the inside the frame, the house groans and someone in nvg's and hunting



gear steps out from hiding within the room on the right. with my vantage and long cover, i'm able to quickly fire a fusillade of 9mm rounds that envelop the area of the entry frame only to find the unthinkable. shots off target shatter the image into glass fragments. the shooter was reflected from a mirror to draw my attention and expose my exact position but the thought vanishes i'm hurled to the floor, sudden impact robs the world of sound until i can discern my body hitting the floor and a bolt action racks to chamber another round, steps move forward.

initial twitches after the fact don't bring immediate pain so i presume the shot must not have penetrated very far to be fatal, more likely hitting the g3ka4's back harness but i keep still not wanting to find out i'm paralyzed later. steps near and i glimpse around the corner of the island where from a fallen mirror fragment in the next room, reveals the assailant a twisted figure, their silhouette a swirl of steel, wood and grass, perhaps a demon from remnants of gunpowder and brass or a wormhole that sought to consume everything until it is the only thing remaining in this abandoned manor and rustling fields. floorboards groan and i snap my leg, landing on something that gives. my assailant kneels, rifle knocked off balance and too close to be of any use but it is too late, the vp70 burst fires into their pal-





ette jugged from their neck, bullets lodged in their brain, trauma seizes them, staring up at the receded moon before dropping unceremoniously to the ground. not wanting to stay much longer, i move into the dining hall moving just making it behind the long table where the far walls blast open with wood flecks and dust, reflex forces me to duck from the shot of a sawn off shotgun from the other side, in the corridor. dust and particulate choke the moonlit space, lacquered cabinets blunted from the pellets carved across the room.. shells load into two barrels before closing to resume fire and i use the quick break to hurl the dining table towards the wall. but the shots continue where i can barely discern the tablepane blasted off hearing only splinters prickling on the floor but i'm already at the end of the dining hall. between entry corridor a split second where the assailant fires their second volley down just after i land in the sitting room. wanting to end this, i dive behind a couch with a cloud-like back rest when i hear the assailant already loading their shotgun that they fire into the couch, feathers explode out of the shot cushions but i keep myself down as pellets tear through the backrest. knowing that i'm pinned, the assailant rushes but as i stare under the couch held up by stands at each corner forming points where the footsteps advanced from one to the next thin columns but with enough clearance for me to



fire within that narrow space, catching the assailant who trips at the pain of 9mm bullets flaring up from their feet as i reposition to see their approach blundering as they fall headfirst into the next spread of burst fire covering everything between the wall and couch, two rounds slice artery and shunt his head to the side where he twirls, gravity leaving him to a slumped position, a splatter of blood coats the wood.

the wired egg's signals return as electricity courses through me once again, my internal os reboots. echolocation detects no threats in the area. on my status settings, it appears the hunting rifle round only bruised me which was nothing that couldn't be fixed. however, it did detect a connection from the sitting room's stairway at the end closest to the entrance. setting the connection, i walk up the stairs to find a door where opening it leads to nothing, the door now framing the manor's stairway like a memory that aborts itself to the void.

while i perceive the floor, a faint emanation ripples its smooth surface. while it is nothing but the presence of electric signals, a tepid warmth clings to my limbs and i quickly form a psycho barrier, righting my contours against the atmosphere spawning the g3ka4, unfolding the





stock where i lean forward into it. in the distance, a lone figure stands with a browning hi-power pistol from the interface's identification of the target. the name is erased but the face is one i clearly recognize from the castle forest office. i bring the battle rifle to bear upon him. iron halo and steel point at his head like an executioner's blade at the neck.

'did you find corrine?' i ask them. they don't look at me instead insisting on seeing the emptiness.

'i should've known someone would come'

'not one for visitors?' i suppose there is too much connection and noise now that the wired is here'

'so, this is your ending, is it not?' they say, turning, towards me, none of their harried manners blurring them. they are as clear as ever even down to their pale lip bent into a grin. 'as always, the things that are unseen are the ones that are in control'

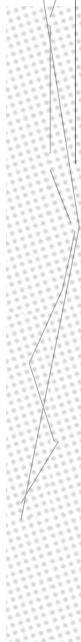
'sorry to disappoint, that you'll just be another casualty. though why did you hide in the wired if your boys decided to bail? seems so unlike the torus helio'



‘hiding?’ no-i simply discovered the advantages this world had. now i’m truly untouchable.’

not wanting to hear their drivel any longer, i pull the trigger, a 7.62x51mm round expels from the barrel, a flash of white and smoke yet a wave of peach, no a massive organism, a quilt of flesh swallows the bullet writhing in pain before its palpitations resume. the creature gathers around its master forming a small circle. they chuckle.

‘soon you shall know the tragedy of the flesh.’ despite my psycho barrier, the pungent fumes were enough to perceive it faintly, tainting the minty ambience that once surrounded me. but my impulse to retch is enough for my psycho barrier to give as a fleshy tendril lashes toward me, and i back up, the thought to run flashing through me and i’m warped a few paces away, enough to steady myself and crack a round into the tendril that shrieks at the fresh hole blown into it before slithering back to the morass pooled around its owner. they then raise their arm to my direction, the flesh pile bubbles before it extends itself like a river to fall upon me and i take to the sky, needing a better vantage point and as i bend my knees, i’m already in freefall, using my bandwidth to get a shot from above only to have something slimy wrap around my leg. repulse shrivels





in my back even dulled by electricity and i fire indiscriminately a long line of shots from the battle rifle becoming steel shrieks, each round carves through like jets already disappearing from their wake, the holes enough for me to rip the fleshy trunk off.

now that i was on the wired, i had access to a few more weapons and i toss a grenade the blast concaves the flesh mound giving me the opportunity to spear them, three spokes from the g3's fired rounds embed themselves to the floor as the salaryperson dances around the pillars of smoke to return fire, in surprise i forget to maintain my altitude and i fall, dodging the first two rounds but the third ricochets off the g3 knocking it out of my hands.

i land but the flesh mound converges upon me and i can only leap, the tendrils wrap around my after-image as i've already warped out of their way but they only mold together, little puddles sweep the space as if sniffing me out. i respawn the g3ka4, finding comfort in grasping its foregrip with flat surface clamped on the barrel.

'all this running is so tiring isn't it? no matter. sooner or later you will fall. your data shall become a part of me too

'what?'



‘that’s right, this creature also sucks up data from whatever it swallows. that 7.62mm round is a wonderful one. a gun with the decisiveness of a guillotine.’ they open their hand and the flesh wraps around it forming the shape of the g3ka4, its soft surface throbbing as if straining to hold this shape, the labour that it provides. this must be a closed space, not a regular server if they are able to manipulate such a monstrosity. ‘now shall i make you face your own weapon’ and they fire, the flesh-composed battle rifle spikes when shot and i can only dodge, my back foot catches my warp-dash and i return fire to try to find a point of exposure around their gore fortress. our exchange in 7.62mm rounds, the clash of swords as a cat’s cradle of smoky pillars has us rolling and dodging out of the way lest the rounds slice through us, thoughts that offer reprieve by their trailing smoke. i drop the magazine and insert a new one, hoping to think of something while i slap the charging handle chambering a round from the new mag but nothing comes. only my opponent gathers data at such an alarming rate almost dodging the minute i flank them.

‘is this all you can do? for someone who fights on the wired, you must have more to feed me.’





‘don’t worry, i’m thinking of it’ but at that point, all i can think about is my grip on the rifle, held in place with the direction of the iron halo and the 7.62 mm rounds that keep me from succumbing to the oppressive heat that could melt me away into panic. but upon realizing this, i ease my hold. as if a child’s first steps, my toes grasp at the floor as if to ascertain it’s still there even with the loosened palm and i despawn the rifle leaving my bare hands which i place outward, curving as if to receive the flow of an incoming strike.

‘given up? very well’

the tendril charges, my stance firms as if just barely holding my contours and thrust my palms toward it, the tendril shrieks flattening upon a barrier as i feel something heavy course through as if i was reborn for a moment before it dissipates, the tendril falls but doesn’t recede as if completely crippled.

‘what the hell-?’ they start before something dawns on them. ‘you’re a qi user?’

my psycho barrier is stronger than ever though my own weight starts to loom as if i might fall any moment. i spawn the g3 back in my hands, softening my grip on it ready for



any hard jolt its 7.62mm rounds may produce and everything attunes to soft natal throbs, not even metronomic but slow enough to perceive the ebb between seconds.

‘you’re just full of surprises. but it won’t work. you see, i know you’re not experienced as a qi user would know how to maintain their meridians. something a gunfighter would not know with their constant discharges.’ their taunts mean nothing to me, even if i were to say something, no words come and i simply anticipate their next attack. ‘well, if you’re that desperate, i’ll just have to end it’

they bring both their hands up, a conductor raising a crescendo as a tidal wave of flesh roars threatening to spill before it shoots long tendrils but as they near they’re close, wrapping around my body as my contours lose their definition, psycho barrier caving to the embrace of the flesh but it all occurs much too slow and i blink, warping backward to where the flesh molds in front of me and at the next trajectory, i already appear at their side from a distance and bear the g3 towards them, its sensation melts upon the pull of the trigger, the first shot still a pillar of thick smoke not yet unraveled embedding itself within the salaryperson’s side, it not yet registers and the fleshy mound is too preoccupied with trying to feed on some-





thing that's not there. i leap in the air, vanishing before appearing overhead, the second and third shots spear down to trap them and time seems to resume as i land, the impact on the ground, the flesh rebounds to the aid of its master who writhes in a thousand contortions from their wound. its companion wraps itself around the holes but it is only at this speed i realize they've narrowly avoided the second and third shot. while injured it's not enough to put them down as they cast their hand towards me, a part of the flesh still spills over in my direction, my limbs already sluggish despite the augmentation of electric signals.

this battle becomes a single plane of endless suffering from the affected flesh to our spent bodies trying to get at each other once and for all with no end in sight, or rather, that end is diminished as no comfort comes to our constant expulsions.

the mound drives itself toward me and despite the thought to dodge, it doesn't materialize leaving a dull ache, but a flash appears nonetheless, the tendrils severed to the ground.

'are you alright?' a voice asks, its cadence rigid yet pulsing up to upper and lower pitch.



2.
LVCIG121
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WPECENV2
G1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EYVAIDV
N1BICE2
23E
2026END1
J12NM
D012
V110NV
W0ENV
D070VE
E1
FVBOVE
M101
IWCIDIDN
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D070V
1B20W
F0BEN

'faux'

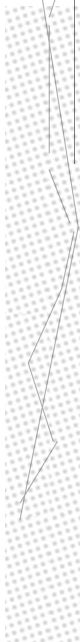
their polygonal cloud not yet a discernible shape but seemingly one step away from revealing its inner enigmas. in their hand, a slender scabbard held upright as if a citadel risen with its steel unerred by the electric signals that form little illusions along the blade.

'y-you...who are you?' the salaryperson asks

'your organization can thrive but your action, no, your philosophy is truly despicable.' faux holds their scabbard facing the ground and suddenly, the entire server quakes. 'cleanse all desire, may the moon bring no warmth to the black sky. will the love of mu and nirvana reconcile their cups, nehan no mu'

the flesh mound twists even more than usual as if it in exorcism and the electric signals move with increasing violence, a fervent drumming that dissolves at all matter their vibrations create a single ampere of noise that mutes the melting form of my once opponent. it is not long until white consumes my vision.

after a moment, i'm in a blue corridor, where i walk into a large chamber with domed skylight that slices the moon-





light into lines of milk along a mural of smooth figures flying in clouds as if moulded by them and dropped where they discover their separation, toys scattered around with a train set running a figure 8. an entire city modelled in grey blocks where little cars zoom to office buildings that light up with pinpricks of light, make stops at cafes and then returns home before starting again.

'you're here because you saw it, didn't you' says a high toned voice and i turn around to see a child but as they walk towards me, their face is besieged with wrinkles.

'kid, i think this is too silly to be a practical joke.'

'i'm very serious'

'right;

'i am i am!' they insist with still some childlike character. i reach down and notice none of my firearms are on me. but they calm and walk around their toy city. 'you're here because we heard lots about you. your combat with platinum torus helio is commendable'

as i say this, the surrounding columns around me waver, light flickers, forming bright shapes until i start to perceive



white limbs, hands that shook one another before coming apart and i realize that the luminous king is here. rather, there were many emerging from behind the columns to gather around the mural around the city where they joined hands and turned a brief waltz around the toy city as if waiting for their chance to be born into this world.

‘so that’s the luminous king? is it? what kind of medieval era did we find ourselves in?’

‘luminous king is a symbol, like all things. anyone can be the luminous king, that is why they are without features. it is a mold in which a person can reify themselves. there is no need for groups like them to try and bring the real back in such a barbaric state’

‘err... while it was kind of an accident. they crashed the virtual currency market to try and restore something once lost.’ i said but saying that, i found that all the malice from before had disappeared and their purpose, finding reality, some part of the world they could find purchase in the sweep of signals was enough for me to find them almost on the same side. ‘ i guess i could empathize a bit’

‘well it’s no wonder producer chose you and saturna’



‘what? how do you know about that?’

‘our businesses have...similarities.’

here i search the columns gathered around which were less like architecture referencing an olden time but more that their engravings, their prism bases smoothed at the corners very much represented this unchild-like character of the luminous king: a shape, an object melted into the ideal form of a column gathered to support the sky vaulted overhead, whose fountains of night turned the impermanent days into lasting remnants, feathers dropped from birds overhead.

another child, face wizened before the light cleanses their wrinkles walks in and announces several companies have been abandoned and that the crypto market demand has surged again.

‘good please replace the buildings in that toy set there’ they order and walk in a circle around it. the other child obeys and dutifully picks out a small piece replacing it with another in their pocket. it is here i realize that this model city is devoid of people, the empty street corners and plazas visible only from the flashes of light zipping by from one car passing through, an office floor lights up



2
LVCIGI2I
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
GILEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVIDV
NIBICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
DRI2
VRIDNV
WVENW
DOROVE
EL
RVBOVE
A101
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
EID2WOD
2ED DO
WE ERIL
VDIB12CI
10V
COM2ECIE
WWEI
211
DOROV
1B2W
ROBEN

triggering another and it is here that these images strike me as almost too real and my own distant view now almost makes me weightless as if this realm removed me from all those void streetscapes that i faced everyday when electric signals would fall to the image at my window. the dancing figures now flicker, their slow movements now in a rapid succession of images as if their data is being transmitted.

‘the future is always in the hands of people. there’s no doubt about that’

‘what do you mean’

‘well, despite the crash, there were enough people who waited for their precious currency to come back and their faith was rewarded. that is the beautiful thing about economics. now people have a choice to decide for themselves the greatest good. they influence what images come through the wired, stylized in valour. platinum torus helio may have had brief support but they could not escape their tragedy’ they smile. ‘now i think that same audience, is looking forward to your finale’

at this, i’m warped back to my car. black towers lean in the pockets of expanse lifted from the low roof as if the earth had split again into shapes, the void above casting





its fractures.

clouds gather, the morning grey yet luminous, steel forged from unseen mills, molded by unknown molten. from when a surface unending in its smoothness refracted light into miniature suns off the vertex not like a horizon but a fateful gathering that was utterly apart from the landscapes and snapped grasses, beyond the hot struggles of limbs and mouth, something very much like the sky in that it tethered the earth, letting it fall and blur around us. litanies of backfires pop from the bosozoku car's risen exhausts, braking remolds the earth out of the streaks of green, riveting wayward grass with the circulations of the solar engine cells, the whirs rotate underneath the vent studded hood with revolutions, once explosions within internal combustion engines past the repetitive pistons and the slow waves of grassland intermittent with faceless high rises, spokes of sunlight shooting past from approaching streets like the strike of a sword before it falls behind the next city block. despite their smooth surface, each building juts slightly out or recedes from the side window, a picture unable to still. ambassador sedans wait around an unusual gathering of traffic as the intersection lit up in gold as if awaiting our congregation. their fronts with large grilles and laurelled badges lift slightly from



the burst of acceleration upon seeing me yet the other cars behind veer this way and that, the sedans could not steer away colliding to the side of a compact, another tries to reverse out only for a container lorry to block the exit resulting in a collision that shatters the rear window. pulling up, i disembark into the maze of car wrecks as shadows meld together, the car cabins, an entangled web that laced upon the shiny pavement almost as if a crown for a diety risen off the spent age of industry now burnt out into ruins upon an unknown cityscape absent of stone or adhesive. the platinum torus helios members fire at the assailants cornering them, one fires in my direction, our pistols flash their barrels as slides rip spent cartridges from the ejection ports like the appearance of pipe-work, the unseen factories in each firearm that ignite gun powder, forming small suns within the intersection, sparks dance off the warped fenders where our silhouettes melt and fade as we reload new magazines, like dropping black edifices onto earth where the sky no longer shares its impenetrable chroma as it cools into blue





Name: Ramaña Shaïgnar

Occupation: general

Sex: male

Blood type: O

Likes: caramel coffee, space folding puzzles, feats of magical engineering, singing over drinks, wood fire, the smell of decomposition, late autumn, the Druidic classics, fairytales, children's illustration, stories about other people's kids, dirty jokes, the human soul

Dislikes: good enough, using magic when you don't need to, consumer culture, inherited status, nosy civilian authorities, dating, cynical genius characters in fiction, soldiers who enjoy killing

Seen with: unknown

Theme song: Blackbraid - Prying Open the Jaws of Eternity

IT'S A GOOD THING
the DARK LORD
is a shut in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)



It is hard for most people high enough in the security apparatus of the Pious Alliance of Humanity to know him to believe that Ramagna Shaïgnar was not born prematurely old and pessimistic, a sort of security program who exists to

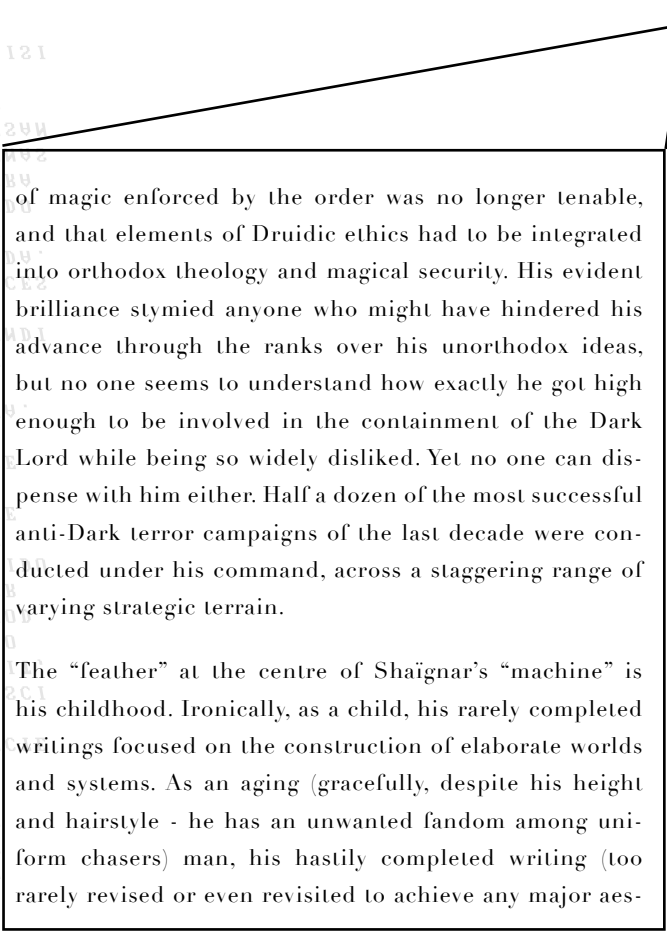
run worst-case scenarios on reality. If not that, one assumes some trauma must have made him that way. And very few are entrusted with any details of his life outside of military affairs to suggest otherwise. Rraih-ha Braz happens to be one of those few.

Ramaña Shaïgnar was a well-adjusted, happy, creative child, and this child persists somewhere inside him - “a single white feather/at the heart of a vast machine of black iron/built to protect it”, in the words of one of his pseudonymously published poems. He did grow up in the security-conscious atmosphere of a traditional reserve town near the Dark Marches, where minor monsters like slimes, chupacabras and bargelds regularly (his only column in a mainstream publication is a formative memory, which he told so many recruits they begged him to write it down, about a Hellfire Centipede that got into his room). But it was assumed by his childhood friends and classmates that he would grow



up to be a writer. He attended a high school offered by the local Alliance base where he learned strategy at a young age, but at fifteen was captivated more than any literature he had ever read (in an admittedly limited environment) by the oral poetry of a Druid caravan that was visiting the school and ran away to join them.

Almost thirty years later, Ramaña Shaïgnar resurfaced in the recruitment rolls at a military academy in Kamann near the border of Zorrh. The Druid order he left has said little about the circumstances of the rare defection except to clarify that he would never be allowed to return. In the academy he specialized in a branch of abstruse mathematized strategy whose brief popularity was already on the wane due to tensions between the Ecclesia and the Alliance. (His improvised magic, especially in combat, is also considered on par with professional demonstration artists.) He allayed suspicions about his beliefs and loyalties by being explicit about his loyalty to Druidic culture, while arguing lucidly that the prohibition on human use



of magic enforced by the order was no longer tenable, and that elements of Druidic ethics had to be integrated into orthodox theology and magical security. His evident brilliance stymied anyone who might have hindered his advance through the ranks over his unorthodox ideas, but no one seems to understand how exactly he got high enough to be involved in the containment of the Dark Lord while being so widely disliked. Yet no one can dispense with him either. Half a dozen of the most successful anti-Dark terror campaigns of the last decade were conducted under his command, across a staggering range of varying strategic terrain.

The “feather” at the centre of Shaïgnar’s “machine” is his childhood. Ironically, as a child, his rarely completed writings focused on the construction of elaborate worlds and systems. As an aging (gracefully, despite his height and hairstyle - he has an unwanted fandom among uniform chasers) man, his hastily completed writing (too rarely revised or even revisited to achieve any major aes-

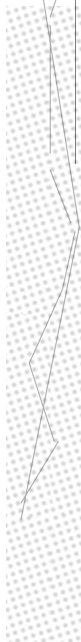


it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

thetic success) is small and sentimental in scope, with the exception of internal allegories like “The Feather and the Engine”. Nothing in his mature life approximates the amber-preserved everyday he has devoted his life to protecting both in his own heart and the security landscape. His only friends are those few colleagues he respects, like Rraihha Braz, who on his rare vacation days he will sometimes rope into a weekend of manic drinking only to return to distant professionalism at the next meeting. As a holdover from his Druidic practice, he has also throughout his life kept a number of animal companions - currently a goat, a wolf and a nighthawk (which often nests inside his coat on official business) - though they do not appear to do magic or speak to him.

The Ecclesia has an entire team dedicated to monitoring him for heresy, but they admit that if he in fact did have heretical sympathies, they probably wouldn't know.

2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
WRECE102
G10EBB0
COMW000
B1202
E000100'
G11BICE2
23E
2026EAD1
1B20W
0012
0G1000'
W000W
D0G00E
E1
T0B00E
M101
1WC1D1D0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E111'
0D1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
0W01'
211
D0G00
1B20W
T0B00E





it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

Synopsis

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



Last Time

braz seeks out information and finds instead forgiveness, release and an encounter that must be struck from memory; luskonneg arranges an encounter with another user in the dessert shop, a rather precarious affair



CW: depression, executive dysfunction, masturbation, childhood punishment (isolation), insects (cockroaches), self-hatred, self-harm, religion, OCD thought patterns, glossolalia, public humiliation, sister complex, targeted online harassment, suicidal ideation, violence

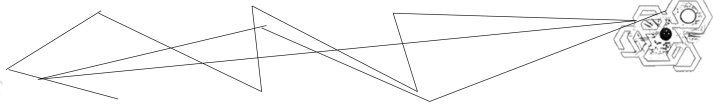
Since the almost-meeting with Llau, Luskonneg had added a new and uncomfortable feeling to his never-ending rotation of weirdly specific affects, like a library of rare cartoon sound effects on shuffle, to distract himself from

He wanted a snack he couldn't get from his mold-speckled cupboard, or even order online.

He had checked, of course - the first time it had struck him like a miracle, an opportunity to make one of those small, momentarily delicious changes to his routine by which he could feel time inch forward - but the cafe he'd now stopped in twice, and gazed across the magiglass display

FAILURE 04: THISTLE OF PAIN

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case twice, and eaten from only a tantalizing once of those two times, did not do delivery. Somewhere he had read that Winter City served less delivery than any other city in its Ecclesiastic category; it couldn't support the bikes and trams that brought food to people in unfamiliar locations, but its spiderweb-thorough and magically heated public transit reliably brought people to food in familiar ones. Long ago he had tried to affect some civic pride, but he couldn't pretend to any more.

Now that there was no way to get it, the resentment that he couldn't go outside - which he hadn't felt for almost a year and a half - had something to piggyback on, and its independent cycles made the original hunger easier to notice and harder to get rid of.

He would suddenly drift back into memories of being young and grounded in his room for the first time, and it would feel like his life since then had been a dream. Thinking he would be in that room forever, like he predicted when his mom forgot to tell him when to come out.

She came for him, after supper when the inside of the window was beginning to shine with the reflections of the light inside, closing him off from even that narrow view like a wound scabbing over, and he had refused to





go, insisting it was a trick. He hadn't come out until the next morning, when everything was so much the same he could pretend it hadn't happened, except a haunted, relinquished look in his mother's eyes.

One of a few victories he had won against her, and every one cut off a piece of his humanity he couldn't even remember what it felt like to have afterwards.

There was something calming about imagining himself as an armless, legless charred lump, unable to move. It made the hunger for distant food - and for movement itself - pass easier.

Because it was that, too, wasn't it. After confirming that the place - November Thistle, he knew the name by heart now even though he hadn't noticed it either time he went in - didn't do delivery he had looked for equivalents to everything on their menu. He had only had the burger the first time, but he'd been planning to get something else - maybe the chocolate matcha cornet, he couldn't remember why that had freaked him out so much now. Chocolate matcha cornets you could order in a cardboard dessert box that would give you like a dozen of them, all wrapped up in plastic packages. Cornets, of course, did not last very well in packaging; these would be a lot softer and less flaky. So



he searched other local bakeries, cafes; there were quite a number of chocolate cornets, even a white chocolate one, and a caramel, but the matcha seemed to be a local specialty.

This morning he had caved and ordered one of the white chocolate ones from Grony'Brou, a somewhat famous patisserie downtown he might even have visited on a field trip as a kid, with an immediately recognizable facade of thin, airy white plaster arches. It had looked delicious on their site; vanilla-sugar-dusted, sealed off at the open end with a glaze. It had been dropped off shortly after 11:00 in a little paper box with silver foil illumination in the shape of frost patterns. If he made a habit of things like this it would maybe almost feel like living in a city.

But then, it could backfire.

The box had sat undisturbed next to his pillow for the last three hours.

A roach was perched on it, not even moving but wiggling its antennae teasingly like one of the bridge drone girls in their jumpsuits in the Galactic Hive Wars ED.

Well that was what he got for looking at something in the





room that closely for that long. He flicked them off if they tried to get on his keyboard—he could snap them all the way across the room like a catapult, it had been fun when he was first getting good at it—and sprayed them furiously if they crawled on any of his most important posters. If he was staring at the ceiling he could sometimes watch them move over it and pretend they were spaceships on a white void. The rest of the time, he didn't have any reason to look at them. They lived here more than he did. They cared more about the walls, the floorboards, the shadows; the discarded cans and crushed paper cups; the crumbs hardened to mineral; the origami tissues; the shining slivers of torn packages. These were a world to them; to him they were the ever-shifting curtains of his world, the screen; a permanent blur of brown and grey, an abyss above and below the patchwork pantheon of posters.

But then, wasn't that what a world to a cockroach was? The antennae wiggling as it poked its head over the edge of the box and then retreated, unable to map whatever smell it was tracing to space. Until he opened it, of course. All this room was to them was a blur of different food-signals, a boring phone game with overlapping clouds instead of pixels. Even the posters meant nothing to them. The screen itself, worlds within worlds within worlds, just a



square of light. The pastry in the box — maybe that was special. It was at least a flavour they didn't get often, might have never detected in their lives. (They? Was this one even aware of others outside itself? Or did they have a hive mind or something? He knew absolutely nothing about actual insect cognition. Maybe he would look it up when he wasn't staring this one down — right now it would just be uncomfortable.) But it couldn't understand everything he had imagined while hovering his cursor over the image on the order page — the texture, the way the hard flakes would slip onto his tongue and crack before his teeth sank into the soft buttery warmth, the cracking and melting of the icing, the way it would coat the roof of his mouth for minutes or an hour afterwards, the fear he had of it being disappointing, the fear of the hours without another one, the memory he was using it to replace.

Staring at it, watching its antennae prod at the prize it was too stupid to appreciate or get at, but he was too scared, Luskonneg felt his superiority as a human in a way he never had before. The mere awareness of it — was that why people hated cockroaches so much they went to such lengths to keep them out? (His mother had hired an exterminator the last time she had visited — two years ago — and after the exterminator had made him stand outside for two



hours, which he'd refused to spend more than a few feet from the door of the building, shuffling and staring at the meme folder on his disconnected phone, he'd screamed at her to never do that again until she disappeared behind the tram door without a word.) Not to mention ants, earwigs, beetles, the other insects he saw occasionally or in seasonal surges — ones he couldn't identify even with the Bugspotter app on his phone.

No sooner could he think this than he had to recoil from the thought. If that was what made a roach worthless, after all, what did it make him? An intrepid navigator on the wired, perhaps, but his own room, the claim disputed between him and the roaches, was nothing to him that it wasn't to them, this grey nebula where he couldn't let his gaze focus anywhere for too long without it feeling like pressing his palm against a rusty blade, cloudburst by needs that he felt and fulfilled and forgot in moments.

There were things that were disgusting about roaches that weren't about him, at least. Roaches moved, endlessly, pointlessly, itching at any arrangement of space, a tedious 3D distraction like sweat or touch. But then, if he compared himself to the other things surrounding him — the posters, the shoes with their soles mostly peeled off, the



ramune bottle with the broken neck, the spilled constellation of lime-mint candies, the fanning spread of character postcards from Sunny Heartbeat Antidepressant Witches, the plastic pieces of a self-assembly office chair he'd given up on, translucent bug corpses - this calendar of fossils, these things that never moved - what was the point of all these movements he made anyway? Sitting up, lying down - scratching his ballsack - balling up a shirt and throwing it in a corner and replacing it with one that smelled more like dust than body again - flicking an empty beer can back and forth against his mattress - slamming his laptop shut to recover from a Feed argument - what was the difference between that and a roach that didn't know how to enter a box twitching its antennae for no reason?

His finger hovered. All he had to do was flick it away, forget this pointless series of existential musings, and enjoy his croissant. Before he didn't. Or something else got it.

He flipped the paper lid up.

There it was. He paused to take it in. The chocolate didn't... shine as much as on the website photo, but it had melted and reformed into bulbous chipped waxy shapes along the edges, while over the rolls of the croissant it was consistent and delicate. It was so small. He couldn't zoom





in on it. The sugar dusting had a sort of gritty pockmark look where it stuck into the icing. He reached out -

And the cockroach had fallen right on top of it, popping up and down no less confused than before.

Something roared through him like a jet engine.

The next thing he knew he was leaning back on his wrists, with one foot out, trembling in its half-off sock, having kicked it to the other side of the room, where the box spun off a (tall, open, mostly-empty) bottle of milk tea and deposited the croissant on top of a pile of dirty socks.

The cockroach emerged from the pile of socks and scurried unbothered up the wall.

So did another.

Luskonneg gritted his teeth.

He didn't know how to cry - at least not anymore. He hadn't since Grade 9, when he'd resolved to condition himself out of the humiliating habit with a razor blade, and the crying just stopped on its own as soon as he realized how boring that was. (The scars where no one including himself would ever see them, across his diaphragm, which he



already hated how it stuck out like a starving child's.)

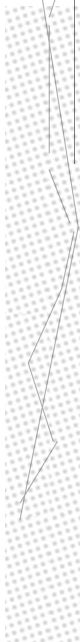
Right now, that block felt like a kidney stone.

He covered his head in his grey, stained, threadbare blankets to retreat from existence, forget that any of the elements of what had just happened existed in relation to each other, and instead it just felt like his empty mouth had become a cavern around his body.

But if he came out, any encounter with the cockroach, any cockroach, would feel as terrifying as if it was his own size and bearing down on him, as if he had been turned into one, as if it was the himself that had been turned into one.

The edge of the blanket had fallen past the edge of his mattress, over the crushed berry-milk bottle. What could be hiding under there? He grabbed it, shoved it through the blanket into the outer chaos.

(As if he was the Goddess, surrounded by the Serpent. But he didn't know how to dance. So he didn't know how to parry its advances nor lead it in harmonious movement. The Serpent would be violating him aimlessly in every orifice if any part of it was allowed to poke the slightest dark hole through the phosphorescent curtain of the heavens.)





A blasphemous image he was strangely sure he had imagined once as a child, in church hearing the Cosmogonic Quatrains of Yama Maya, and been filled with a fear and pleasure so deeply intertwined he held in vomit until the end of the service.)

Nothing, except two-thirds of the circular wrapper of a sucker, and a pen cap, which he was pretty sure he had been given in high school.

And a pile of aromatic brown grit. What was that?

He faintly remembered brushing it off his skin when he woke up - dragging a pile of it in a crescent with the pen whose cap was all he would ever find again.

He had gone through this routine about three times. (Once, since, without his mother - without telling her a word.) But things had been too weird lately to allow that again. He would probably just let it go.

Until when?

Was he happy? He didn't think of himself as happy - he wasn't happy - but he couldn't imagine himself as happy living any way other than this.



The more he stayed under the covers, though, the more he found his eyes darting to every shift in the light - was there one in here? - why was he suddenly scared of a thing he had learned to live with? - why was he suddenly living with a scary thing? - if there was a scary thing, even in here, there was nowhere to hide now. It would all come crashing in until it compressed him into a spiky ball of meat. This was the first wave of the final invasion. This world that had been created to torment him would tickle him to death.

There would be no 'inside' except the inside of his own body any more.

And because he had dared to invite... 'outside' in here. He had broken his one and only taboo.

(He had the sudden awareness that if he combed this space from top to bottom, cubic inch by cubic inch, which wouldn't even be a bigger waste of time than half the things he did, he would find everything he had ever lost in the past five years.

Nothing was ever lost in here - wasn't that what he'd wanted in the first place? And yet he knew he could never catalogue this space that thoroughly, or something he needed





would be lost about it - he needed endlessness, he needed to lose things, too.)

In that case, what would be so different if he did go outside?

Maybe that was all he had to do. Maybe if this was punishment, it was just for being so silly about this for so long. Since when could he literally not go outside? He'd never made a taboo. He just... hadn't. In- well, a little less than a week now.

Since that first time, when he had gone out to that restaurant, it had been two years and six months and -

Huh. Since he had last tabulated the number, he had forgotten. He had never missed it before, and immediately lost track.

It felt like he was in a clearing of light. He wondered for a second whether he was dissociating again - or was this the opposite of that?

Could he trust himself in this state?

Light that corroded people's souls and made them feel compelled to construct an alien fractal as if it was the dic-



tate of their own moral conscience - that was the premise of another one of Shunny Nājda's masterpieces, Shadow Rangers Kliphot.

Squeeze, squeeze your eyes shut, until it felt like darkness again-

But now, with a sudden self-consciousness he heard in his mother's voice for the first time in maybe longer than since he'd left the room, he was being ridiculous.

Nothing was stopping him from leaving his room. Why did he feel, day in and day out, like there was some force field around him? There was nothing he wanted to do out there, and nothing for him out there, no work, and no friends, and a million stressors worse than the occasional roach or dragging the occasional stinking black bag of garbage to the chute at the back of the hallway. So that would be enough - he wouldn't start living suddenly. He would just walk three or four houses down the street, pop into the cafe, buy a... matcha cornet, because there was no reason he couldn't buy a matcha cornet either, and walk back home, and not throw out the one he'd wasted for another three days because he still didn't want to think about any of it.



His room around him, as he stood up, the blanket falling like a molted shell around his ankles, still in his PJs, but he wasn't going to change before leaving either, just to prove a point to himself, felt like an illusion, part of a map in a video game.

He couldn't stop playing, couldn't wake up from the illusion, but that didn't mean he couldn't do things it let him and enjoy it.

In refusing to get changed, Lusconneg almost forgot his wallet, which he doubled back from the half-open door to dig out of the last pair of pants he had chained it to (no, not those ones - not those ones - ohhh, those stink). His PJ pants had pockets but its weight would probably drag them down enough to reveal his ass crack, so he just clutched it in his left hand, knuckles flexing against the fraying leather. (His PJ pants were covered in chibi faces of a girl from a show he didn't even like any more sticking out her tongue, one unrolling right to the edge of his fly opening, but there were too many identical ones for it to be obviously lascivious. His oversized shirt draped almost a foot past his crotch anyway.)

He focused on nothing but the light at the end of the hallway.



Fine, let it corrode my soul.

Luskonneg was swaying gently from side to side at the cash register, but otherwise not acting strange, as far as he could tell.

“Sorry,” he apologized quickly before speaking, for treating this space for real people as part of his video game world. In fact the second he had walked in the sense of irreality had dissipated and he was still pretending it hadn’t - the mere gazes of the half dozen people inside, only one or two on him, had a solidity no object in his room had. Moving felt like hacking through underbrush. Yet pretending was working, and he was doing it with the same dissociative calm. “Sorry, can I have a, uhhhh... ch-choco... chocola... chuck-” (why did he keep going back to the beginning of the word. he wanted to get one through perfectly but was just making it worse.) “chocula- um- can I - can I uhhh - “

“Chocolate matcha cornet.” The cashier’s eyelids didn’t budge.

He nodded enthusiastically, mouth sealed like a plastic bag, eyes garrotted by laugh lines, scanning as much as he





could the soft-green cursive-font letters behind the glass for proof there was nothing else he could have been starting to say.

There were, in fact, at least two other choco-chuck-chocula products behind the display glass and that wasn't counting the choc-board swaying above, different sized loops strung cryptically across a nebula of eraser smears. Maybe the matcha cornet is just the most popular product here or something. But he could feel a familiar static around him now. Something told him he had to get out of sight.

He whipped around and pulled up his shirt around his ears, narrowing the lens of his vision to the free table he had identified, and once he pulled up a seat let it bore into the grain of the wood.

He suppressed the spiralling implications of what had just happened by using the grain of the wood as razors on his eyes.

He got absorbed in it long enough he didn't even leave before the cornet came. He reached out for it without looking before the server had pulled his hand away and in his startled recoil he caught the exasperation and disgust in the boy's face.



What was he? Outside, in physical space, he felt like some kind of big floppy anemone, some tumbleweed rolling through the world. He didn't feel fully animate.

But as he sucked his breath in and out, his hunger came roaring back.

He fell on the cornet. His hands tensed to crush the whipped cream out of it as he bit down and he didn't care. Its flavour raced around the inside of his mouth like a fire in a million shades. His eyes were closed. He ran his tongue through his stubble to clean up anything he missed.

It was probably better than the other one. But this didn't relieve the longing for the other one. The 'probably' nagged at him. He wanted them to compare. And what if one didn't make the other redundant in either direction?

What if they were both good in irreducible ways? What if every single cornet was good in an irreducible way? What if he was immeasurably wasting his life in every second he didn't spend eating cornets -

Oh for crying out loud, this was philosophy class in high school.





Why was he back in philosophy class in high school? Why was the skylight above strobing with those magic crystal ceiling lights -

He blinked.

A correction.

The light was different.

Softer - decayed.

Had none of this happened? Giddy with relief, he speculated how far he could unroll events, attempting to reconstruct them as he did.

His mouth was mushed into the unrolled remains of the end of the cornet, which was now soft with drool.

The noise was different - a family, with kids, was talking loudly somewhere on the balcony between him and the (now amber) skylight.

Never mind. Blacking out from overstimulation was a completely normal thing that happened to him, so unremarkable that he simply hadn't considered the possibility of happening here.



(Online, it gave him a sort of mystique as if he actually did have a social life of some inscrutable kind for all his relatable complaints about isolation - dropping out of an argument for six hours, returning with “sorry, afk” as if nothing had happened.)

In fact, it had happened there (in high school), too.

He now recognized the distinct impression of having gone through several loops of the flashback that had been vexing him in his dreams, none of them productive, until he had simply exhausted himself awake.

He scraped flecks of lotus whipped cream out of his whiskers with the side of his finger and debated whether to eat the rest of the cornet.

He felt he didn't need to leave here with a complete success - almost, that it would be wrong to, or to pretend he had.

He stood up. Somebody at the cash turned - a woman with beaten bronze features, hair pulled back in a twist of braids - and startled at him. He had been here so long they had changed shifts! Did she even recognize him - from the Feed page or when he had come in?



“Hey do you want anything else?”

He said nothing as his mouth began to twitch and his face began to redden. He pulled his shirt collar up around his nose. A clump of icing shook down from the curve of his ear onto his collarbone. Being a cryptid, at least, gave him some framework for interacting with this space without the pressures of being a human.

A giant roach.

Of course the normies who ran and frequented this cafe, at least, should have the wherewithal to call an exterminator.

Luskonneg stepped out into a sudden wet squall of snow - the sky flashing slick blue-silver behind the rooftops - the frayed hem of his shirt strafing his bellybutton. He hadn't even thought about the weather when he had come here. The short distance, the exertion of steps and the weight of thoughts had been on the way enough to completely drown out any sensation of temperature. As soon as it had even the slightest advantage over his attention, however, it set in like a mania.

He ducked back in, leaning on the doors as he held them shut, screwing up his eyes, trying to tense himself out of



existence.

"Hey do you need a coat or something?" The cashier leaned on the glass. "There's one in the kitchen someone left here before they left a job and we haven't found anything to do with it."

He had now relied on others' kindness two out of three times he had been here. What was happening? Nobody would ever have let him get away with this in elementary, or middle, or high school. And none of the people, nothing of the world outside had changed. From his digital window that much was abundantly clear. On Feed a third of his follows were random normies, just to give him a clear and accurate image of the social world outside his room - with screenshots - to complain about. So if the laws of the universe were capable of changing on him, they were not laws at all but an agential will changing deliberately. The Serpent was in fact the Goddess - or was the Goddess in fact the Serpent? There were conditions to their behaviour, but not conditions he could manipulate, because the complete humiliation of his attempts to manipulate, or even negotiate with them was the primary condition.

He swung around on a torn heel, leaning as much forward as he had when he was leaning on the door.



“Why do you want to give me a coat.”

Luskonneg, shirt no longer hiding his face, smirked from under his hanging bangs, over his exposed collarbone - as if he had just exposed them.

“...because you’re gonna be cold?”

“And how does my being cold or not affect you?”

The whole store was staring now. A middle-school-aged girl leaning over the back of the chair of the matriarch at the family table struggling with their camera. “... it doesn’t? You can be cold if you want? But it doesn’t affect me to lose that coat either.”

“There is no neutral, arbitrary action! Everything is directed by interest, in one direction or another!” Would anyone here know he was quoting Shadow Rangers Kliché? “From this rhetorical dishonesty alone, I can tell how ashamed you must be of your ulterior motives.” He turned back and slammed the doors open.

The cold caught him in a vice grip.

How had he not noticed it when he walked out here? How was he noticing it so much now? These spontaneous in-



consistencies in the sensitivity of his physical senses had always been a thing - thinking back to that philosophy class, how he'd had to be moved from a seat next to the radiator because the way it moved the air distracted him too much to finish tests, only to be called into the office and accused of faking it because the same didn't happen with a fan in another room that he hadn't even noticed existed for five months.

He pulled the doors closed again reflexively. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't accept the coat after what he had just said. But it wasn't going to get any warmer. Even if the snow stopped. The sun would be setting in about an hour, two? Its light was already smearing the sky.

The sky through the wide glass doors was too much to look at. He couldn't look away and couldn't think while looking at it. It contained all the cold and all the stares and questions and sweet things. It was like a whole other internet of light he couldn't access mocking him.

He slumped down against the wall in the antechamber between the doors, put his head in his arms until the grey of close shadow took him and pretended not to exist.

The door pushed against him as someone tried to enter.





Why didn't it shatter and completely destroy him. He wanted it to hurt. It clearly wanted to hurt him.

Why didn't he go out in the cold if he wanted to be hurt. That was a different hurt. A hurt that was indifferent, incomprehensible to him.

It wasn't so much a hurt as an impossibility. Himself freezing up. Overloaded by the sky. A webpage loading.

Overdose. Shutdown. If he opened his eyes, he didn't know if he would see anything.

No, he knew he would see the same world, as if he was stuck on a loading screen. He was trying to click out and it wasn't going anywhere.

The door pushed into him again, deliberately this time like he'd wanted, and surprise, he didn't want that either.

"Hey. Get up. Pain in the ass."

"Just let me wait. Just give me time to wait." Was waiting something people didn't do in the normal world? How did anyone get through the day without doing it? Ever? It seemed as absurd as never eating or masturbating.

"Hey, are you OK? Should we get someone?"



The good cop-bad cop voices filtered down from above.

Get someone. The ultimate solution. No longer relying on others' kindness, simply their sense of necessity. Being plowed away like a snowbank. It had happened to him a few times before. Each time it had felt reassuring in the moment but he had sworn it would never happen again.

He would simply accept it like the light moving in and out of his room. Nothing around him was human. It couldn't hurt him. Geological forces moving. It would happen with or without him. He would never have to do anything again. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, and opened -

Not Feed. What if someone saw that and connected him to his account. Human again.

In fact, if someone came, and connected him to his mom -

He looked up.

He didn't realize until he did that he had recognized that voice. He somehow had just assumed anyone who talked to him would have the same voice, like it was the default selection in a computer voice bank.

What he recognized, though, he hadn't even noticed the





first time. The cloud of taupish hair. A cloud, not only in that it billowed out - not on top but as it floated down around the shoulders, blending with the rough white-and-black fur of a coat collar - but in that he couldn't seem to make out where it ended, its soft tips keeping almost static distance and spreading out together into a vague, rounded halo, an edge made only of light.

The face itself flinched away into its own shadow the second his eyes made contact.

The shadow of the nose, surprisingly harsh, almost hooked - but he had only been focusing on its texture back then.

The woman who had paid his bill the first time he had come here turned away and pushed the doors open.

Laughter rose up from somewhere.

He swivelled his phone around. He couldn't let her just disappear. Why had he come out here, this was the world where anything and anyone could just disappear, where everything disappeared as soon as it started to matter to him, the world constantly playing a game of fort-da where nothing ever came back, and at the same time the sun and the snow and the cold floor and the laughter wouldn't



disappear no matter how much he wanted them to - but he didn't belong to that world, he belonged to the world where you could save things and get them back whenever you wanted, and close the window and make them disappear. He had only come out here because that world wasn't working to let him order a fucking glazed croissant -

His phone disappeared from his hand.

He had never even thought to download a safety app - there were ones that magically generated a three-dimensional model of your surroundings in a five-foot radius, ones that emitted a stunning curse - he, the last person who would ever need one. And of course it wasn't his laptop. If he were to somehow make it home, without any tether in the world he belonged to... but then it would still be gone. He stood up. How long after receiving it had he stopped resenting the phone's existence as a redundancy? It had only been meant to replace his laptop when he did... what, this? Even his mother knew he wasn't going to start doing things like this regularly. But he had come to find it useful in the same sense as a redundant set of arms. It let him scroll in places, positions where the laptop would be hard to position comfortably. He used it to fire off posts and comments while watching something on his





full screen. He had whole separate accounts on it he used to evade bans. All in all, it had come to be trivially his second most precious possession. The only one even in the same category as his first. His laptop's doting little sister. Like one of those little sister characters that woke him up in the morning when he was too sleepy to open the laptop, to focus his eyes through the slant of light shadowing the screen and making the galaxies of dust stand out. And there, a vortex of numbness in his agony, an agony that belonged to neither world, that hand was tearing her away like a stranger in the market. What hand. Whose hand. Who would dare. But there was a hand. A shadow over him. No - a silhouette under him, as he stood up, swayed. A few inches shorter than him, and that was enough to feel like he was looking down from a skyscraper. To be honest, he wasn't sure she was even awake; he hadn't charged her in days. But wasn't she adorable, always sleeping like that?... He forced his hand down from the ether of dissociation into pulsing green-white nauseous hellfire and reached out; hit skin, hair, follicle, pore, bone. What did the hand look like. What had taken her from him. Pale, more disgustingly pored and haired than the woman had ever been, like some fucked up medicinal plant in a sidebar ad, with painted fingernails, iridescent purple. He hadn't cut his own fingernails in over a week. He hadn't



dug the dried cum, the cockroach shit out of them. He dug in, pulled, until he heard a yelp, and felt a pull that almost sent him reeling off balance. Another disgusting pale hand slammed into his shoulder and re-balanced him. Now the hair was coming into view - yellow and red, that same hero cut from earlier. He was pivoted and pressed back against the wall.

"What's your problem. Yeah no shit we know you, that chocolate matcha cornet video from last time got us on Punkin Patch. Do you know the kind of obnoxious customers we have to keep out when a video is on Punkin Patch."

Punkin... he was on Punkin Patch? Of all the weeks to not check it! He hadn't been on since he had found Seer In The Half-Light's page, still too shaken from his own reaction to dig deeper and see if they had any entries on there, but knowing he would if he gave himself the chance. The infamous website had started as a sort of online Klaux-ion's Funniest Home Videos until it had specialized into something more like an informal, anonymous intelligence network keeping tabs on the most mundane details of anyone they found funny - embarrassing - cringe. At least that was the official story. An aficionado of online mysteries like Luskonneg, of course, had in his time stumbled across





at least one of the vanishing download links to the site's original baffling repository of information on the life of a single ur-lolcow, concentration gaming obsessive Kogoe Paunkin, which had been wiped by the government following Punkin's suicide almost forty years ago.

"Going in there and scaring people when everyone knows the Dark is more active than it's been in a lifetime. You think our regulars need that. Thinking someone is trying to put a curse on them."

Luskonneg reeled. That was it. He would never attempt this experiment again. This was the most rapid and total humiliation yet - an indisputable sign from the Goddess he'd long ago decided not to believe in rather than feel so humiliated by. (The way Elphantom was humiliated in that Seer In The Half Light's analysis... so was it true, then? Could people be - this was a heresy, he couldn't remember which one, they had a disclaimer about it in every other article - Dark against their will?)

Its namesake had not been the only suicide to its reputation, but the government had never gone after Punkin Patch like that again, letting it do what it had originally done on an unforeseen scale, a scale it had grown to partly thanks to its brief sanitized period. Luskonneg had no

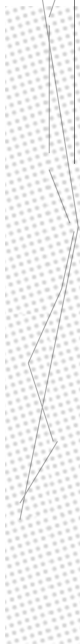


doubt this wasn't an oversight. The government was happy to let them do what they did - it only bothered the kinds of people who might make problems for them - including, famously, Dark sympathizers before they did anything seriously illegal. At that point the admins strictly complied with their obligation to report to authorities - authorities who would have never otherwise noticed many of these isolated, random actors. As to why they had gone to so much trouble to erase Kogoe Paunkin and what had happened to him - a thousand-page archive Luskonneg had yet to essay in full - he could read about theories all night.

The kid grabbed his shirt collar and pushed him up against the glass. Luskonneg didn't move. The cold was like going underwater. He was envisioning reaching out and tearing this kid's ears off, pulling his jaws open, dragging his crushed eyes across his teeth. He was also envisioning the same happening to him - a massive crowd descending on his Dark body like crows.

"No really. What is it? What's my problem?"

The kid's grey eyes were like molten metal being churned in some immense factory process. "I don't care, you can't film people in here! You know there are shapeshifters out there collecting biometrics to steal people's identities





now!”

“But you’re telling me someone did it to me!”

“Well, maybe they looked like they knew how to be human doing it!”

...ahhh. So they didn’t think he was a cultist, they thought he was something pretending to be human.

Come to think of it, he’d seen some headlines about shape-shifter alerts in Kamann.

“Hah. So you normies are feeling it for the first time, huh.”

“...feeling what?”

“Not knowing if anyone you see can be trusted. Not knowing how or what they’re thinking. Not knowing if they even are thinking, the same way as you are. Reconstructing them from scratch with every new piece of information. Even if they do everything you expect, knowing they might just be waiting for a chance to hurt you. Not knowing why they would hurt you, or if there needs to be a reason. That must be almost as bad for you normies as losing internet for a few days was for me, huh? I’m not Dark, but I can almost see the fun of it if it makes you people seethe like



this. Of course then it makes me hate them even more, because it just makes you feel special for something I've gone through every day of my life. Since I knew other humans existed, since I knew their faces looked like mine. Goddess, I'm on a roll today. It would be trivial to post something like this, but I didn't know it could just come out of my mouth too. Unless... uhhhhh... uhhhhhhhhhhh

The boy's face was twitching with confusion as Luskonneg redirected his focus from the construction of words to the sound of his voice and realized nothing was coming out. Nothing had been coming out - how far back? "uhhhh-hh.... uhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." a strangled moaning. Like the Unwilling Vowed in The Tongueless Monastery (a classic of Silmenon religious exploitation, its battle with the censors opened up the entire doujin field after it...)

That was it. People were staring staring. The city guards had to have been called minutes ago.

They would come to his place, even if he managed to stagger back across the street. They would contact his mother.

Was there some easy way he could die before they did?

Whether he was hurting them, or they were hurting him



- there was no way to resolve that besides not thinking about it any more. That meant either dying or getting his phone back.

He still had a survival instinct, huh.

He pulled back on the wrist holding it, fingernails digging in until they drew blood. But it didn't move.

He wasn't sure if he was moving his own arm. Nothing was connected. How could it be without his phone? Without the internet?

What connected anything in this world? Pain.

It didn't count. He hadn't even felt it. But the panic in the kid's eyes counted. It was stabbing him with a million memories of eyes that had stabbed him. Eyes hurt more than hands.

Pain was the most unique thing you could do in this world. Well, he knew everything anyone needed to know about how to hurt people in the other - he hadn't calculated it yet like he'd been meaning to do, but he was pretty sure he could troll any random stranger with almost 80% efficacy, judging by replies and subFeeds after people blocked him



- but there was always a guessing game, like there was in all words, he was good at it and that was why he was good at guessing, but a guessing game never gave the satisfaction of a fist to the face-

which somehow never gave quite the satisfaction he wanted, either, because despite his most obnoxious years as a kid (5-10) he'd barely ever gotten it himself, and the couple times he had felt like he'd somehow missed it.

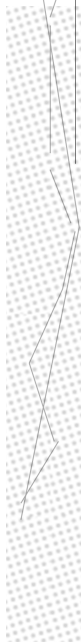
No point, not worth the -

How much worse could this situation get?

He tried to imagine the future, and he couldn't. He was already suspended over a precipice.

Multiple people were bumbling up now from their tables and dusty light, indistinguishable, like a forest moving.

Luskonneg pulled on the hand with the phone fast and hard enough to drag his assailant off balance, staggering suddenly towards the glass he was leaning against - still holding the phone out of reach even as his other hand stabilized him against the wall of the magiglass antechamber - he was real he was real oh god he had to explode





stop being real he would kill himself as soon as he got the phone back and could say good-bye to her -

The boy's weight fell away backwards from where Luskonneg was lifting his own shoulders into it, and he stumbled forward into a curt sweep of wind as the door swung open, his assailant's shoulders first, then the hand of someone whose other had grabbed his shirt collar and dragged him half tripping over himself into the door's loading window of light.

The stiff ribbons of a cheap C'harnian headdress, like one you'd get at a tourist trap except with ultramodern lace styling and subculture pastel accents suggesting an actual designer, maybe from a street market, floated in front of him, holding her frizzy bronze hair behind her head. The almost blue darkness of her skin and sharp-slanted blue-green eyes suggested an origin in the archipelago of Klauxion. Less determined by what Luskonneg understood of the phenotype from endless ethnic banter threads, she was short enough that she couldn't have clotheslined the boy across the neck, as he now gathered she had, with her leather-booted feet less than a foot off the ground. As he fell into the street he found himself facing her (she had turned around).... jaw broad and square, a black-flashing



gap between her front teeth, laughing eyes closed. He instantly memorized the character design.

They both fell halfway to their knees to be pulled up by their own collars in her hands, heads hanging parallel to hers.

“Who the hell are” - the boy stuttered as she let him go and he pulled away. His phone! Where was his phone? Luskonneg saw it clutched in the hand that had just let go, held at full length away from him.

“Journalist, crown accredited. Do you want your face in my story?” She flashed a camera in her other hand.

“What story - could you possibly write - about this?” His words muffled as he shielded his face and backed up the pavement, his jacket - some white, stiff, reflective hype-beast shit - dragging off his wrist as he pulled away. He didn’t even grab back as it fell into the journalist’s loose hand.

Crown-accredited (accredited, by extension, by everything else) journalists were powerful - their vows to the Ecclesia and Alliance gave them similar privileges to military, municipal guards and clerics, though they were simultane-





ously considered civilians insofar as their loyalty was assured by boards of censors outside their own professional bodies which had arisen independently. They could invoke a number of legal exceptions in the explicit pursuit of an approved story, but - there couldn't possibly be one here. The boy was just scared.

Of this tiny woman's physical presence. Luskonneg was too.

"Tell me where to drag you," she said as she turned to Luskonneg with a predatory, yet dignified smile, like if a hawk could soften the set of its beak. "I won't write anything you don't want me to write. The story isn't about... what happened back there, per se."

He let his legs fall into a walk cycle as if she wasn't there and dragged himself - the streetcar too far off when his boots clicked on the ice-black metal to get himself run over - across to his side of the street, but suddenly realized in that same blink of distant emptiness that she still assumed for some reason he was going the wrong way, and he had never gone further up the street than November Thistle. A tangerine tear in the mattress-fluff of the sky - he was heading West, the sunset changing something of the character of the light on each new block he squinted



at ahead.

Something weighed on his back. Her shadow? - she had fallen behind him - but he was facing the sun - did he not even remember how shadows worked. It was the coat.

A texture so different from anything he had ever felt he didn't know how he would describe it when he talked to himself. Like wireframe folding around his shoulders.

Her Marque wouldn't give him any right to keep it. If the owner went looking for it, went to the guards, explained what happened... He remembered he did have a coat, at the bottom of a bin he hadn't opened in years, and had been throwing things into. If there were roaches, that was probably one of the places they were, gnawing and fucking and laying eggs and dying and piling up on top of each other with nothing to show for it.

He knew he couldn't stay out here forever. Eventually he would have to turn back and reveal his deception. He didn't have what it took to be homeless. There were almost no true homeless people in Winter City; there were free state hostels just up north where the river met the main metro line. Only a few dedicated schizos made a point of avoiding being dragged off there, usually LARPing as itin-





erant prophets from the Warring Age or something. He wasn't one of those any more than he was a Dark cultist. He wasn't cut out for the hostels either, with their loud canteens, shared bathrooms at the end of an echoing hall, inescapable blank plaster walls. Of course it had occurred to him once or twice.

But he wanted to get something out of this excursion. A glimpse of something new. It had been so long since he had seen light like this. In waves over everything, a sculpted mesh. And what was she. This character broken into reality, this walking tear in the border of his world, a worse collapse than the cockroach, inside and outside now feeding back into each other. "Who are you. What do you want from me."

He waited to hear if his voice would be intelligible.

Her head turned.

"I mean it kind of was because of whatever happened back there, but I don't mean that story is newsworthy in itself, don't worry. People will forget about it, except maybe that guy, but he has his own problems, probably." Her voice was short-breathed and staccato with excitement in a way that reminded him of eroge voice acting but not because



the comparison was particularly close, just nothing else he could remember hearing was closer. "I'm a freelance journalist. Culture journalist. I do... human interest stories, but like serious ones. I uhhh... I have this Royal Marque, investigative degree from Yn Dahh't journalistic monastery, twelfth degree theological clearance, but it hasn't gotten me work yet, and I guess my journeyman pay's gonna run out soon." Crown-accredited and on journeyman pay? Luskonneg didn't know much about how any institution or career path worked, but he knew this was weird. "I saw you on... well you heard, didn't you. Punkin."

He started hitting himself in the middle of the road, and she kept walking as if he wasn't, so he followed.

"No, it's not like there's a lot of us there. Not enough, in my opinion. That's what I'm trying to prove, I guess, and haven't found a way to. Y'know, this is a peaceful era. People talk about the Dark Cold War or whatever, but that's made up by the media, by culture journalists like me, to convince people anything's happening, that they're still part of some sort of narrative, and I don't wanna play that game. I think people need to face the reality of this boring, stagnant world they live in, but I need a story that's interesting to show that, and it needs to be something the





government will approve of. So I lurk Punkin, and try to talk to fucked up people, and otherwise wander around looking for, well, things as crazy as today to happen. Because wherever they do I can probably find people who fall through the cracks even in this easy mode, perfectly designed world.”

“What do they know about me on there?”

“That’s the great part, nothing. The video’s not that funny, they didn’t even look.”

This stung as much as anything else so far, somehow.

“Are you going to give me my phone back.” The sun bobbed over a tile roof, with a wire running alongside its snow-lipped gutter, where a torn canvas shoe had landed somehow.

“If you let me put my number and email in.”

So two - three - steps outside his room and he already was what he had been to Class 7S again.

He didn’t even have the will to imagine this was a nightmare. It was a new stage of cruelty like the world had developed exactly whenever he had expected it.



“Did you... set this... up?”

It was the only way to explain this that wouldn't have him frantically backreading curse threads on the /m/ archives for the next week. If that would be enough.

Laughter fell like a rain of diamond spit. “Why would you think that?”

It couldn't be a nightmare. His nightmares were just montages of getting yelled at as a kid. Nothing interesting ever happened in them.

“Give it back,” he growled.

He planted his heels in the gravel. He wouldn't be walking any further. Even that had been tempting... what? What was doing this?

“Huh? What did you just say?”

He had one chance to stop it.

He let all the menace everyone had projected onto him surge into his voice.

“So you're... not scared... of me... too?”





“No, I just can’t make out a word you’re saying any more, either.” He knew she was lying - he could hear corners of his voice clipping off the walls of buildings, in a way he had never heard talking to himself inside, and which his brain would never have thought to fill in on its own. Besides, he had long since given up on trying to read faces, but she wasn’t even hiding it. Her smile was like looking straight into sunlight between two buildings. He closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure how he even remembered what that looked like. How many more things he was going to start remembering, the longer he stayed out here. “How about you put one finger up for yes, one down for no.”

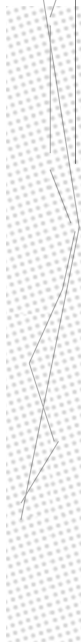
What was he going to do? How was he going to prove her wrong? What if he really was Dark? What if he had forbidden magic that a Warding App wouldn’t recognize? He could barely do regular magic (party tricks like making emoji in smoke clouds and animating a holiday puppet, they didn’t teach you anything useful except theory because all the modern versions of spells were proprietary and taught on the job); it had been his worst class in school because he would keep getting distracted or self-conscious doing the rituals, “millipede trying to teach itself to walk”, but he knew the feeling. He had read those stupid Elphantom books too. He had read every “I’m a



Dark user, AMA” thread he could save in the three minutes before the mods took it down. He wasn’t a Darkfag, but he couldn’t do magic so it didn’t matter if he was. Didn’t matter if he thought about it. Didn’t matter if he told Seer In The Half-Light ‘I get it’. All of that simulated darkness, what if he could concentrate it in one glare. One eye. A pupil that would swirl into a black hole as if brush strokes were constantly being added to deepen it. And one finger. Reaching out to carry all the Darkness concealed in the eye, the relation between the eye and finger the basis of the spell. The finger marked, perhaps, with the sign of the pupil. Was this from something? And when the pupil was deposited on the body, eventually it would explode. Oh right, this was a historic spell from the Dark war that had been conceptually neutralized so re-enactors could use now. But his threat didn’t have to be real. There was no real in the dark. Everything doujin. Non-canon. He was grey, faceless. Break leg. Tear clothes. Gouge eyes. Dig past eardrum. Gnaw cheekbone. Crush diaphragm. Penetrate orifices. Refuse existence.

“Great! Thanks!”

He looked down in cracking plaster on his trembling finger extended two-thirds of the way to her palm.





A comedy buzzer through his bones. Oh no, I zoned out again and actually did it???!!!

He whipped the finger back under his arm up to the wrist like it had almost been bitten off. His glare all the more furious for the dissipation of its power.

She pulled his cell phone right up to the collar of her coat, underneath her chin. "Perfect!"

Someone was pointing at them from the other side of the street. With another brisk movement she dropped the phone back in the slit breast pocket of this jacket that looked like a bad photo edit on him. "Shit. Tell me where you live and I'll get you a private motorickshaw. I have the money for that. I - I do have the money for that." She wasn't facing him. He thought of trying to lash out again, but how much worse could things get? What had he even done in the first place?

He started walking. He waited to hear steps behind him - the Stalking God from When The Dragonflies Dance - and when he didn't, started breathing so rapidly he had to force himself to glance back.

She was racing in the opposite direction as frantically as



when he had left the restaurant the other day. Either he had really scared her, despite the martial arts skills, or - she hadn't been prepared for any of this either. Which didn't make him want to talk to her any more. If talking to someone else would be like talking to himself, well, then - how could anyone possibly justify it.

A streetcar roared past him and he squinted against the gust of noise and displaced snowflakes and only briefly opened them after it had stopped letting off mechanic exhalations to see her pull her silhouette up to the doors and disappear.

He thought about collapsing again, thought about what he would do if someone else tried to talk to him, and kept moving, so numb he could convince himself his eyes were too and he couldn't even see his surroundings.

But it was all real.

It always had been - from the moment he had stepped outside - his attempts to deflect it, the ways he had tried to deflect it at other people, talking to them like shifting hallucinations, apologizing, soliloquizing, threatening, only deepened its absurdity.





The paradox had broken down his ability to move into infinite frames - but this person had just moved effortlessly across the border of his world. The world that existed so no one would have to see or think about him ever again.

And crushed him under it like a cockroach.

Once he was inside again he was able to open his contacts - read the name that had been typed there - and delete.

“Who in the fuck approved that operation.” Commissioner Braz was furious. “Who decided any of that was necessary.”

The Colonel-Inquisitor adjusted his tie. “Well, the bit where he almost released his powers in a cafe was - not ideal, but even the reports said it could have easily happened, you saw how many times he came close in there, and if he started going out again regularly... but we did what we had to do, we put our asset in contact.”

“You don’t” - Braz stood up and leaned towards the hollow centre of the table on her palms - “introduce a bunch of new destabilizing factors when you’re trying to solve containment decay. Especially not ones that create new communication vectors! Mages knew this centuries ago when dealing with a homunculus! Her social ineptitude itself



is a relatability hazard. I take it this was you looking for glory then - and risking the safety of my country before anyone else's?"

She watched the widenings and contractions of his eyes.

"She isn't even my asset! But the way this has been handled... it's not stable. Having no assets in contact has destabilized him. He can't even go outside without getting into the kinds of encounters his powers might very well treat as life-threatening. This proves your strategy hasn't been working!"

"That's what this is about, huh? Your - of course not yours personally, but one of you guys' assets - relaying you information so you don't have to go through the [Taboo Preserver]'s reports. You're playing internal politics at a time like this!"

"You are both right," a soft deep voice rolled like a wave of dust through the round marble meeting room, as the silhouette enframed itself in one of the narrow doors that slid open between thin cobalt-striped columns, gem-encrusted birds nesting in fractal arabesques converging towards the top of the shallow dome, "and this is the problem. Multiple points of that excursion breached twenty deviations





above the probability range the [Taboo Preserver] has maintained for as many years.” The man pulled himself into his chair, lifting his narrow feet off the ground. “And the number of times he’s broken containment of his own initiative recently suggests other spells might be weakening. This poses a problem for either strategy - relying on assets, or relying on simple isolation. Commissioner Braz, I commend your dedication to your strategy.”

“Th-thank you.” The Colonel-Iquisitor instantly evaporated into the background of Braz’s attention as she turned to face the voice. “Commander Shaïgnar.”

The man in Alliance uniform, half her height, wore his hair in a druid-style tonsure (even though it had been decades since he had defected from their orders) tied into a braid down his back. His long salt-and-pepper moustache trailed down to his collar. “Do not relax it for a second, but if it fails, do not hesitate to cooperate with our assets. As the closest to the [Taboo Preserver], if there is a chance you can find out anything we can’t from the reports and standard interviews, it’s your duty as a soldier of Elthazan, a noble of C’harn and a liaison of the Ecclesia to do so - even if your conversation is ‘personal’. In the worst case scenario, where he’s developing any sympathies - don’t



think I forgot raising that risk at his selection - you may be the only person positioned to find out before it's too late."

His eyes met Braz's, and suddenly she couldn't hear anything else in the room, either. "If necessary - if your loyalty were guaranteed by some means beyond your vows, which it is merely my job to doubt - I would be willing to consider removing other professional barriers between you and the [Preserver] to facilitate this."

"Wait what barriers do you think I" -

Glancing into the peripheral space that seemed hard to focus on for more than a split second, she realized they were alone and she had options what to divulge.

"Don't worry, you won't remember this part after you leave here." The Colonel-Inquisitor's face tightened from side to side. "And he won't remember it at all."

The rarely used meeting room was in the same complex as the [Taboo Preserver]'s cell, and accessible only to those with the highest level of clearance in matters pertaining to the Dark Lord, but Shaïgnar's personal confidence was a level above that, and he alone had read/write access to the memory control field. It had been years since he





had visited the complex in person. Besides Braz and the Colonel-Inquisitor, only two authorities had bothered to visit even in these dire straits, and had been mostly silent through the meeting, but this did not seem to bother him. If Shaïgnar had his way, the entire containment of the Dark Lord would be conducted directly by himself through secure psychic comms on a spell he himself designed. Braz understood that Shaïgnar's schizoid, almost solipsistic self-confidence and paranoia of others was itself in theory a security liability, but still respected it over the punch-clock careerism of most of her colleagues. This respect of course was a large part of what put her in Shaïgnar's privileged circle.

She still had never brought herself to confide in him the true nature of her feelings for the [Taboo Preserver], but took for granted they were taken into account in at least one of his models anyway.

"There really isn't as much to know as you think there is. If you're about to ask whether I mean about what he knows or what you think I want, I mean both."

"I was afraid you'd say that. It's worse than I thought then."

Ordinary sound flooded back. "That operation was, of



course, an unacceptable risk. If the magic restraints are weakening, who knows what happens if we put him in a fight or flight situation? However, the journalist might be an asset to our understanding of what exactly is changing. Especially if there are things the [Taboo Preserver] isn't telling us. I recommend we don't cut her off immediately - but escalate her to a Tier 3 Targeted Individual."

"Tier 3?... " Now that sleepy Ecclesia representative, nursing their useless cup of a restricted ceremonial microdose tea, perked up. "Even his mother isn't Tier 3 any more!"

"I had half a mind to upgrade Llau to Tier 3 too, and depending on how things develop, might yet. But it's clear that right now we need a fractal security strategy. If I'm right about why, we'll need to assume war footing."

"That's what... I was trying to do..." The Colonel-Inquisitor stuttered.

"Make no mistake, Colonel-Inquisitor. After this, if we go to war footing, you're losing your clearance, and all your memories of it."

Braz was still thinking about Shaïgnar's remarks about her and Ymaññ. She almost wanted to find out what exactly



he knew - what his model was. But she knew if she gave a millimetre of vulnerability, he would take a mile.

Instead she took up his offer in the simplest possible terms. She alone left the meeting room through the half-height, triple-thickness door that led to the [Taboo Pre-server]'s cell. Shaïgnar's words echoing so vividly in her head she had to shake the fear that he had slipped some kind of monitoring spell onto her, though the security in the meeting room should have prevented even that. Selfish, unforgivable hope mixing with dutiful trepidation, marked by the same heartbeats.

When he looked up at her, he was sandwiched between two of the dogs. Red tracks of raw, wrinkled skin showed beneath his eyes.

It wasn't treason. It couldn't be. She would tell Shaïgnar that. Would he believe her?

"Hi Ymañn. I hear you've been having some interesting dreams lately."

Ymañn groaned and one of the dogs shifted as he rolled over, draping his head over the other's flank and letting it fall to look at Braz upside down.



"I hate not being able to do anything about it. Not in the dream, not outside it. And you know, he hates it too. He doesn't want to leave, doesn't want to change. Nobody wants any of this, so why is it happening?"

Braz sat down on one of the pillows. Tentatively - more tentatively than usual, despite the carte blanche she might have just been given - she reached out and stretched a hand through his hair. It was so thin. The individual hairs, that is; there were still quite a lot of them for his age, though even and yielding, and a faint negative vortex forming around the back of his head. "That's my job to figure out, I guess."

"Like you don't mean it actually could be anything, do you? Some sort of Dark conspiracy as sophisticated as ours - but if they had that, they would just move and take him, wouldn't they? I mean, I know there isn't any it, stuff is just happening, and it'll probably settle down soon, I just get my thinking mixed up with his sometimes, where it feels like there's some all-powerful thing out there, maybe the Goddess or the Dark, messing with you - which he doesn't realize is mostly us. But I used to feel like that too, before I joined, sometimes, and it comes back to me in weird ways at times like this."



Not sure if she was overreaching, or if she just needed to wait for a clearer cue from Shaïgnar - but he would know, he knew everything somehow, and would take this as a bite on his offer - she slid her hand up from his hair to his cheek. "I'm me. I'm another person. Like you. I'm not part of some big cold thing. He might never understand that, but it's not your fault. You can still be you."

"I mean it literally is my" - he stopped, sniffed, let his head rest heavier on her hand - "you know the funny thing is, when it happened, right before he went out, and again, right before the journalist showed up, I felt like you're saying. I wasn't in him any more, even in the dream, I was just floating over the scene, watching. I couldn't do anything of course. But I was me, and he was him. I don't think I could even feel inside him, what he was thinking."

"You... lost connection." Braz pulled her hand away, sitting bolt upright. Well, Shaïgnar, is this what you were looking for? "Were there any other times?"

"There was one other time, in the restaurant, but nothing really important was happening, he was asleep... oh. Oh. Rraihha."

"Something important?"



"Do you have a timeline of what happened. Like, not from my notes, externally. Did you figure out who that woman is that the journalist was talking about."

Braz shuddered. "It's the same woman who paid for him the first time. That's... a dangerous connection, too, but it's our job, we can deal with it."

"No, just - when did he see her."

Braz undid the buttons on the front of her jacket. She was still carrying her clipboard with the info from the meeting in her confidential storage pouch on the inside, which she hadn't opened in here in months. A couple of Ymañn's drawings were in it - but not the one of Luskonneg. "About 54 minutes after he came in. At 5:23."

Braz blushed, and took a moment to realize why she was blushing. Oh. At 5:23, on that day, she had been in the washroom, rubbing one out, thinking about - well, she had done it precisely to stop thinking about the person next to her now - but that had backfired, because the only other person she could think about was the stranger from Coun-tour, and that brought her back -

"Oh - that should be - I wasn't watching the clock, but -





that sounds like around when it happened. It was about fifteen minutes into his dream. I think he was almost at the end of class.”

What did this mean? The phone call, the contact, was one of the events Shaïgnar had described as a probability anomaly - an event outside the range of constrained unpredictability some of the most sophisticated spells were meant to keep the Dark Lord surrounded by. Those spells were not easy to disrupt, if you even knew they existed - a traitor in their midst? Or was something just happening to Ymaññ, his magical stamina degrading? My working hypothesis, she scrawled later that night in a report she would pass to Shaïgnar privately before he left the next day, is that it's a defensive dissociation - Ymaññ's subconscious is breaking the connection, and disrupting the spells, to protect his subjectivity from merging with Luskonneg's. Has this ever happened with a [Taboo Preserver] before? I'd be surprised if it hadn't, and perhaps one of their notes will contain some insights on how to deal with it. I'm requesting access to the [Taboo Grimoire].

She didn't say - because it would sound too nakedly self-interested - that if this was true - and that was why she had to be extremely careful, poring over the archives of the



[Taboo Grimoire], to ascertain whether it was true - that the best solution was probably to let the [Taboo Preserver] form other relationships that weren't tied to Luskonneg, that would anchor him when he was awake.

Lying in bed, a thick inherited blanket covered in florets of rough-blue thread spread across a narrow officer's cot, two candles lit on the desk across the room in case she wanted to work (the light soft enough, on the other hand, to let her go to sleep if she didn't), the dark around this light somehow darker, thicker, smokier than it had ever been...

She wondered what kind of relationship that would be.

A deeper friendship, that would be enough. That would be more than she had ever dared to hope. Could it even be deeper? All her other models for friendship involved sharing parts of a life he couldn't have. No one less restrained than her in the first place could have invested so much a relationship so limited, was how she had always thought of it. But maybe it wouldn't always have to be rushed between other errands to the secret installation in the mountains north of Winter City. Maybe one day she could be there when he woke up; plan the whole "day" together. She could spend enough time there for the dogs to trust





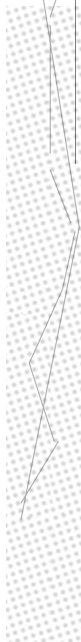
her; they could curl up with the dogs together, curl up together through the dogs. Maybe she could ask him about the parts of his life that were redacted on the documents; things that made him a person outside of his dreams. Maybe she could tell him he didn't have to run from that any more. There is someone to be a person with you. I haven't wanted to be a person with someone so much in so long.

Ymaññ Ulwen, lining up coloured glass bells to set up a spell that would ring them in a self-elaborating fractal loop, sneezed. A dog lifted its long head and whimpered.

A cockroach crouching on top of Luskonneg's phone, on the corner of his mattress, scampered off as it vibrated in the dark.



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Name: Kali I

Birthday: Unrecorded, presumably summer 2643

Sex: Roan

Occupation: Scholar king

Blood type: 23-C

Likes: Travelling, lantern carpentry, quiet nights, calligraphy, throat singing, fancy high-end vellum, urban design, lamb, culinary theory, claw gloves, bonsai

Dislikes:: Water, sand, cold mornings, motion sickness, heavy clothing, beak carving, tardiness, overindulgence, naivete, bugs, chess, and pork.

Seen with: Aides (primarily Harka, an old friend, and Fili, a potential successor), the general population of Quay, other tengmu administrators

The proud leader of one of the largest tengmu communities that have taken root within the hull of Savannah. Self-styles eirself as royalty as a wry sort of theatricality; less a claim of genuine authority and more an I-can-get-away-with-this smugness. Is good-tempered and patient, forgiving and unfazeable



because E lives in eir own world of desperate duty, and doesn't take bickering with those beneath em to be worth getting worked up about just let em get back to eir books! Injured as a nymph and left stunted and unable to fly well, E devoted eir life to the study of human culture and the improvement of the settlements E's helped establish. Ruthlessly inquisitive, deeply ambitious and hopeful, cares less for the state of eir people than the course they are on moving through life full-voicedly but as if always looking a hundred years into the future.





Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.





Last Time

savannah's architects host a gathering which gives emelry an opportunity to interview some of their most elusive members



CW: confinement, species prejudice, death, altered consciousness

In blur I eat cattle and bread

To appease the record of records

Jade burning grass

Tall sky blue hurt

Where is the hope and heat to eat

Of my blood, my gold, my roan?

Talesi flew the sun in a day

E found no place of honor

Talesi was born of the rooms

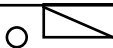
And the line from speech to silence:

Of what E had E made a pyre

001
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VCCNM200
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010E880
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B1202
EB00100
01101CE2
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10
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Don't
like
the
line

RECORD IV



And dreaming again stacked high

"Here I make my blade of Henna

Here I find the bane of kings

Ka! Ka!" Talesi once laughed.

"Now I'll have none of it."

Poem 73, Kali I of Quay

What more could they possibly want? Is this all bluffing for negotiation's sake, or are they actually incapable of foresight? When I was last there, trinkets and ceramic supply were more than enough, this is baffling. Tell them again. I'm sending a sailbarge to Third to show off, we'll load it with everything we've mentioned, proof of wares and capacity and anything, anything! Be ruthless, it's bowering season and they must have cloth and rope. Even timber we can have here, with struggle, but there must be some line they'll follow.

Meanwhile while you've been out the border station is complete. Hsay (third), at least, has been able to make it work. We've been mobilizing for extraction but again, months away from making the manufacturing side work, so much setup left - which we desperately need the supplies for! Soon we'll never have to worry about this again.



Where are our contacts? Where are the bodies we need? We can hit flow so soon. You can't delay. Phase Four is arriving and we must be ready long before its time is here. Remember what we've invested. Come home and you'll know. We'll climb the mountain, you and I, and relish it. Up here the air is so clear, so thin. It's where storms come to die; where storms whisper and bear young. You'll weep with joy to see it all. But we can't wait.

Unlabeled status missive, presumably Ynewy Fletchetteir
(fifthright) Quarry

The nature of the King of Goods is the axle and the spokes, the central nature and rainbow of potential expressions. How fire and spear fed thousands of people before killing once. That's the project, that's God's claim on the world. So the tension is there. Sun and blood, death and heaven, om and us. That challenge to build with volatile blocks. Of the tenths, road seems the most vague, the scholarship of it always lacking. But I've been reading back, in the Usas psalms, how road is distinct from more core principles. The common ground between light, soul, heat, plasma, a background animating principle etched into natural law.

Like an arrow? An arch? But it follows a pattern. The star patterned in stone patterned in egg patterned in heart. How when iron sharpens iron we can see it, eventually. We see it in our



neighbors, this mastery... I feel like I'm watching orreries in real time, dancing little mechanisms that tell stories more than they record facts. Cultures that can dance like that, that can pattern the arrow-breaking flow of tellurian power - in fact, the exact shift from "violence" to "power", digestion to fire to resplendence - we can see it. That yes, it can happen. You can climb it, it's possible, you were reading it right: you can take all life's blunt balance and pattern it into something foundational. Cast the arrowhead back, century by century, until it really is gone forever. From the star, pattern the hearth, and then pattern the heart back into the star.

Eight-Tenths Testament, Admonitions 3:5-6

Record IV

concerning the discovery of a murder

The raven stood nearly as tall as I did. I was afire. The balance of the litter tipped - Didion scrambled from where he had fallen, out of the path of the litter's skittering restablilizing legs. I clung to its velvet and porcelain chassis, and



we all stumbled together in the first meters of Savannah's dust.

It grumbled at me as it perched, looming, blotting out the light. How could I ever speak again?

I pulled myself up back to sitting as the litter found its balance. Slowly, I took it in against the dazzling tree-color or vastness behind it. The creature's plumage was glossy, sleek black, and brilliantly, brilliantly ultraviolet, shimmering iridescent and dark. Its beak was... bizarre. Metal bands embedded into it. Grooves, lacquer, hooks and flourishes, like a well-used tool more than a face.

Didion had found his feet, and let himself collapse onto the support of the litter. "You - you understand us? You speak Akkadu? Those words?"

The raven was inscrutable - stared, ruffled, bobbed its head. "I hear you. I am Minak. A scout and flier nine rain years. Lieutenant, I will light now? I will come at dark where you rest, and we all can understand and speak. Glad tidings, glad tidings, I love you, we begin!" it cried.

"We've been looking for you!" Didion nearly shouted from a hiss. "We - we knew someone dwelt in the interior! Was it



you, who met her above? What is this, are we really here?"

"Ka! So high, then, and now I fly low! It was I. Good, I cannot stay." As it spoke, its head carefully scanned the surroundings - and as it finished speaking, it spread its wings. A whirl of strange earthy air hit us, flecks of dust, and by the time we could see again it had gone.

We stayed. Watching the interior yawn away from us, I had never felt so small. Neither had I ever seen such color.

I gasped, I breathed in, the air seemed to fill me. It was so green here. Green in the light, green, yellow, tan and red, blurring with distance as the far, far sky fell into its warp. The wind hit us, from far away. I failed to completely catch my breath and was trapped into a series of gasps, my eyes narrowing in the light - how was it so quiet? The sounds of whispering trees, few and far as they may be, must have echoed from across the entire cylinder. They felt louder even that the waterfall far off to our right, cascading in slow motion down the cliff wall of the cap.

Didion was shaking with adrenaline from the near fall, "Emelry, we must go. Anyone could come, they could have seen."





I looked down the long light-paved paths under that vast ceiling. "Where...? Were they not to fetch us? The doctor's bus?"

"I don't think we'll be met... Emelry?"

"What is this. What is this." I looked down again, Didion wide-eyed and weakly resting a hand on the railing. "Yes, yes of course. Come aboard. We will on."

At last he listened. His hand was cold and limp as I pulled him up. We were able to do it alright - were strong enough to make the system of braces and supports between each other for this kind of liter mount, but it was still back-breaking work to help haul him up.

He was right, we had to go. The spotlight fell on us. We knew. They knew. If, somehow, none of the doctor's group were watching us now, it would only be a cursory glance at the footage of the town to know, for every party to know every thing.

The town was a strange patchwork and utterly empty. No border whatsoever between the manmade and the natural things; buildings lay dropped on raw soil, trees and grasses growing wild and indiscriminate. And it was emp-



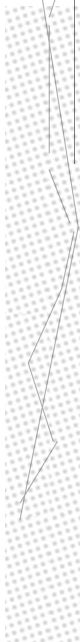
ty, emptier even than the unoccupied zones of the caps, for here there was no life-support buzz, no grounding lights but the false sun above.

"This is a bit of luck," Didion said, leaning against the front rail of the litter as I claimed the back. "A straight line down, and a straight line there. No chance of losing our way."

This was true. Why then had no one greeted us, when there were schedules and lines of sight making it so easy? I felt toyed with, what else was one to think!

There was one main concrete road, and the rest dirt as we had joked of. The town branched off from the main to our right, row-houses and low offices; to our left, fields and farm shacks, and some miles away the thundering waterfall that fed the river. The air was humid, moist from the spray, making breathing even more of a challenge. Yet even with that it was arid, arid and warm, like water on sun-burn - there was a sharpness to things, a stone-and-rain edge that was wholly unlike the dry stillness of life-support climes.

Building after building, brick covered in smooth, fat, coral-colored stucco marred by kicked-up dust at their bases.





Pretty as flowers are. And before us, at the end of the road and far center of the town, loomed the greenhouse, a tall, cubic tower of a building with, oh god, a great brass dome crowning it that was patterned after an aviary.

“Ha,” Didion laughed. He agreed, “It’s a prison.”

“The habitat entire.”

Such a grand building, but it did not feel out of place. The rest of the town was of a more typical, rustic construction—brick walls, shingle roofs, very picturesque. But the greenhouse was of the same material as the cap walls, a striated grey-green low-cast ceramic, and seemed like a rock-hewn monument which had laid in this place for centuries. As if it was an outgrowth of the wider superstructure.

As we approached at a light gallop, the great green brass doors swung open, and a rather harried group of people tumbled from the threshold—Razina the foremost among them. One was a mousy changeling woman, blood-red skin and eyes to match; the other a tall solar man with a steady smile. I recognized him, from the crew manifests, one of that rare handful of solars among the staff.

“You’ve made it in one piece!” Razina called, when we had



thundered down enough of that packed-dirt road to be within earshot. “Too good for the bus? Well, regardless, welcome to town. This is Aetheotl, and Danalir.” She gestured to her left and right, at a smiling solar man and a blood-red changeling woman. “The lieutenant and scribe. Thought you could use some company.”

“I’m sure it will reward us.” I squinted in the light, shielding my eyes as I nodded to each of them. “Doctor, a pleasure to be meeting you again.”

“I run logistics here,” Aetheotl said, jocular and bright. “Y’know, town matters, housekeeping. Really amazed you’ve made it here, honored. I thought I had it bad just adapting from Areal.”

“And I’m the greenhouse head! We’ll be running through my space a little bit, so no need to stand out in the sun...” the other said. She cheerily looked up to Razina for permission, and then swept the group of us into the building.

“Multitasking multitasking...” Danalir muttered as we passed inside, up the grand temple-esque stairs and engraved doors, into its yawning central hall. From a distance it seemed just an odd collection of geometries, but up close and within it was like a library, a monument, its



style similar to the lunic motifs of the receptor zones. Statues here, too - human figures with crows perched on their arms,

Didion was staring. I wonder what I would have thought of such audacity - the figures' faces with assured smiles pasted on them - before I had known.

"Welcome welcome! Now, I am the head here, but it's all such a group project..." Danalir said, jogging ahead of the group to peer over the long railing that begun at the floor and rose, along with the central staircase, into a wide spiral upwards. But below was a pit. "The greenhouse here is strictly the doctor's. You've... seen one right? Lived with them?"

"Yes of course, they're from Saniasa. Not completely pondunk," Razina scolded. "There's plenty of use for greenhouses in hydroponics and such. But," she said, "this one is something special. Come, come, look at this. It is a real display piece."

We walked the litter to the edge, standing above even the railing. It was like we were emerging from clouds. There, down the sheer walls of the pit below us, was a tiny facsimile of the Savanni landscape - mountain peaks built into



the cap-mimicking texture of the wall, hills rolling out from them and a busy myriad of miniaturized life. Mosses lying in fields of grass, tall bonsai and bushes with little half-foot-tall giraffes grazing between them in herds.

“Our production models are much more involved. Usually we’d want a whole field at this scale, maybe ten times this floorspace... a lot of the basements are devoted to that sort of thing. But this one is more of a jewel, little bit of everything to greet you. Pretty, don’t you think?”

It was. Proof-of-concept microsystems were an integral part of habitat development, but the sheer number of biomes and conditions Savannah was capable of must have necessitated hundreds of building-blocks like this. Greenhousing was a production-model proof of species palettes, done just small enough to be practical and repeatable; just big enough to simulate long-term dynamics. Those giraffes were more toy than proper animal, brains like lobster ganglia - but they herded, and grazed, and ran when hunted. And that was enough for any sustainability fault lines to become apparent.

“It’s a bit of a patchwork. Been moved around alot,” Danelir said airily, “but there’s culture lines in there probably as old as the whole project? All the key components.”



She pointed down to the tiny landscape. The sound of the water trickling was not so far away as to not reach us; there was a mockup of a building of wood, built into a tree, by the puddle of a lake. “A little ambitious, but why not? There’s a few more mockups of what surface construction could look like, even though we’re not doing that yet.”

“Why is that?” I asked. “You’ll excuse me, but Fisher Valley is yet more outpost than town. There’s quite the lack of infrastructure for settlement, it seems.”

“It’s a selling point, y’know? The do-it-yourself bent. The showrunners limit us pretty heavily, even in the town, anything we wanted to do bigger than a few floors has had to be here. Or under here. Once plots start wrong sold they’ll be waaay out there... proper city-sized footprints, semisovereignty, people are gonna want the pristine...”

“Ha,” I said. “I can see set Pearl Wall not being happy with that.”

Razina shook her head. “Oh, Sever will be on board. Whatever we end up with, it’ll be something he wants.”

“That’s real red carpet stuff,” Aetheotl stepped in, “Wow, I don’t think I ever actually met the guy, but I heard you



tracked him down quick.”

“Yes, well, it just comes with the preliminaries,” I said without properly looking at him, and continued to ask Razina, “Why do you say that?”

“The phases are moving fast,” he answered for her. Like the three of them were juggling the conversation between them. “And the lord doesn’t have much interest in the landscape, unless he’s joyriding.” He and

That bothered me. He bothered me. Who was this? “Ran logistics”, a vague nothing descriptor. So he was a lackey of Razina’s, one of those she managed in the course of whatever level of retirement she had ended up in? But his backtalk bothered her not at all, she said nothing but a soft smile and a shake of her head. He immediately cowed and stepped back, hands behind his back.

“As Aetheotl said,” Razina said, walking towards the litter with one hand imperiously on the greenhouse’s railing, “times are changing. It’s why you’re here. It’s not exactly an architect’s game any more, you know... really, I don’t mean to be cruel, but in as much as this place is a home for any of us, he’s the most stuck here... you must be getting sick of gossip. Come on.” She swept her labcoat uniform



up with her, and stalked off to the spiral staircase wound around the walls, up to the aviary dome.

Landing by landing we went, perhaps twenty stories up. As adapted and accustomed to weight as they were, it was amusing how the three lost their breath bit by bit as we climbed. Each floor seemed in a state of disarray. As if they had been hastily disassembled, packed up with just the dregs left - or, that it was newly-opened, only the first trappings of its eventually grand interior assembled. The lower floors were worst of all, the inner rooms we glimpsed from the broad stations at each landing a mess of packaging, fine construction, drapes over statues and canvases. Higher were offices with knocked-down cubicles, barren cafes with rows of empty refrigeration - it was here we rested for a moment. The group remained quiet. "What is this?" I had to ask, halfway up. "It looks like a storm's passed through."

"Well, it has! I can answer that," Danalir said, bouncing over and putting her hands on the railings of the litter where we had stopped. "It's been kind of a mixed-use building for a while, studio and storage room for us who live down here. But you, you, the new phase and all! I'm having to reconsider it all. So we've been doing the upper levels first and moving down; all the junk's collecting



down there as we finish more and more of the place. I'm kind of mad you insisted so hard?"

"I'm sorry?" Didion started.

"Like the director said! Crown jewel. If only you'd given us a few more weeks we could've put more of it together and..." She didn't even seem upset, only this airy, childish pout.

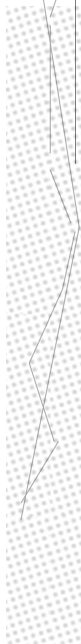
"Danalir," Razina had taken a seat at the bar of that empty cafe - she, of all of us, was coping with the climb worst. A terse, covered sigh. "We are heading to the top."

"Right right! We can keep going, then."

The thud of the three's footfalls on the stairs, the tic-tic-tic precision plodding of the litter. Didion noted, "Parts of this are to be a museum, I gather? Quite a lot of statuary and canvases laid up in corners."

"Mm," Razina said with some effort. "A lot of artists on staff, you know. Things like this attract them. But yes, obviously a showcase on all that. There's a lot of cover. All the history, staff culture, engineering, what have you.

"Staff history, as in the communities formed here? Would





we have access to the plans for those sections?”

She hoisted herself up and kept climbing.

We walked the rest of the way up. The trio's ragged breaths had me feeling more at home here - we'd had an easy equivalent of an elevator ride, they not so. The staircase flattened into its last landing, circling the base of the glass dome in one long balcony.

“Ha.” I couldn't help but laugh as we turned in to the observation deck. It was like a flattened version of the lounge we had met in.

“Here we are,” she said. “I wanted you to see this, come.”

We tiptoed over. The window curved, long and low, above the rest of the little town.

The greenhouse complex stood at the far end of the village. From this direction one could look back upon the rest of the streets, and the great cliff of the cap wall looming before us - always shockingly close. This was the clearest we had seen it; the far end was simply too distant to see through the air, and every other view was from an angle. But here it was, mimicking rock for what seemed like



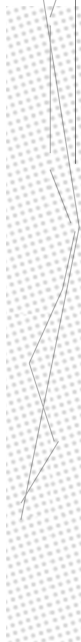
a scant mile-tall trim, quickly retreating to a distance so great it seemed to disappear. Above was the clean white of Hightower ceramic, glinting blue like an ocean-stone in the light of the sky, and the spine jutting out above and behind us. Was it this that the crows had seen as the disk of the sun? A blue shield and white sword, geometric in the way of orbital law.

“Overcome again?” she asked with a smile. “I love the walls. You can never get away from the scale of it all, but here its laid totally bare. All around us is the scale of this world, but it really is laid bare here. Look, see there?” She pointed to the waterfall, and guided our gaze upwards along it — we had to huddle around the edge of the window to see. The chassis of the litter linked against the glass and recoiled.

“You came in right down the same way; the trains run right next to the primal water mains.” Primal? “Up there where the waterfall starts, those are all the actual facilities. Tucked away in the caverns, it’s all very mystical.”

“How does the water get here?” Didion asked, “if the river flows away?”

She nodded. “Yes, the rivers always run towards the center,





from both caps. The central lakes are a sort of midpoint facility, of course too far out to visit in the time you'll be here. Getting here was hard, that'll be weeks. Well. The lakes drain underground to shadowrivers that run back here, collecting runoff water that gets filtered back into the soil." She smiled with a satisfied breath. "Think of it as a bedpan. One of the little ways we concentrate complex closed systems into single pivot points."

She walked briskly along the curve of the window, raising her voice as we followed. "But, the town proper. Fisher Valley, after the water and the wall. The dorms are there, the brick building with the courtyard; the center street runs from there spinwise to the fields, antispinwise towards senior staff housing and biochemics. I live there, the blue house."

Suddenly, I could hear the water. Fisher Valley wasn't really just a town beneath a waterfall. Beneath us ran a third of all the waters of this world, equal in scale to those yawning industrial caverns of transport ways and ventilation I'd seen by train.

It occurred to me. If Savannah was a bone, it was hollow.





Nothing else of note on the tour. We took the elevator down, perhaps mercifully, in its long glass column with a view of that central spiral. We ate together at the bottom floor's cafe, open and stocked well with local produce and imported packaged food - carrots, curry, coffee. Aetheotl had disappeared, leaving us to listen to Danalir dominate the conversation, a detailed rundown of town happenings and plans for the greenhouse building. Just in case, I held my lie detector out of view in the bed of the litter, and made sure to maintain occasional focus. No more missed details, I told myself.

It wasn't until we left, night falling, that Aethotl returned, now on horseback. As we descended those front steps, he pranced about in front of us, kicking up orange dust with that grin of his.

"Figured I should try and match you guys! Pretty cool, right? The stables are right by -" he turned the beast in an awkward, mismanaged circle, trying and failing to point to some place in the town behind him, "- the granary. Huh!"

"That's enough," Razina called from the top of the steps. "Where is that bus? But we can walk back, if you'd like. Just don't expect me to gallop."





Aetheotl held his smile and led us down the road.

We walked the litter between the two, hanging behind a pace. “What were you doing at the stables? Were they still open?”

“Nah, everyone went home. Just wanted to show off a little.”

“What do you think, lieutenant?” Razina asked, turning back with an air as if she’d just remembered we were there. “The great martial art of horse breeding, ha ha. The pinnacle of Savanni genetics.”

“How big are horses, usually?”

They both laughed at that, predictably.

“It’s rewarding, honestly.” Aetheotl waved one slim but callused hand in the air. “Gets you back in touch with the basics. Breeding’s a changeling thing, obvi, but... yeah, it is that, huh? You’re not being silly. It is a martial art. Like weaving.”

“Little practices that keep your hands sharp?” Didion asked. “Though weaving seems cleaner.”



"Quicker, too!" Aetheotl laughed and trotted ahead of us. Razina was simply dour. At this pace we completed the last blocks until the first stop on the path to where we would be staying the night.

"Well. This is me." Razina unlocked an iron gate. We were at the blue house she had marked, taking up a block all to itself, circled by a waist-height brick wall. One of the more humble buildings of the town, with a dense garden plot and a small greenhouse - of the kind used to only grow plants, rather than as a test bed - huddled in the corner with its fogged windows. "We'll call it here?"

"Yes, that's quite alright, doctor. This was a wonderful introduction."

"Yeah, well." She smiled wryly. "Aetheotl will show you to the tubs. They should be up to your standards, that's important, bring it up with me if anything's wrong. Think about what you'd want to start with, in the morning."

Didion nodded over-courteously. "We will. Pleasant sleep, doctor."

She nodded, and latched her gate behind her.



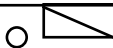


We left her in that garden. She went there first, not touching her front door, going directly to her tomatoes and lemons with the hiss of a hose. I looked back too long - how somber she looked, when she was looking away from me.



They said the amenities here were bare, and it was true. The bathhouse complex was robust but sequestered - intercepting one of the networks of subterranean canals that ran from the waterfall basin, and stood at some small distance from the town. It served as the center of water - redundant reservoirs, communal showers, laundries and the like, hot springs. The sleeping tanks were included as an attache, a low-slung concrete building separated from the main complex by a small barren courtyard, and it was here that Aetheotl hitched his horse in the courtyard and showed us in.

"I sent ahead," Aetheotl said, opening the door to the annex. It was a dark, close room, with several tanks separated from each other by simple reed screens. Little privacy, less a bedroom so much as a changing room, or capsule hotel. It would serve - in fact, the warmth of the water already in the air, and the little baskets of Ilian amenities, made it feel quite well-considered. "So they should be filled up



by now. You can set the heaters as you'd like, controls are inside. Inside the tanks, I mean, not just the room. Um."

"Thank you," I said. "We will keep that in mind."

"Hey, this is really safe? I kinda worry about sleeping underwater... feels like a lot could go wrong."

"Well, that does not inspire confidence, coming from this facility's steward."

He was wounded at that, embarrassed even. "Sorry! Everything's working fine! I just mean, the principle of it..."

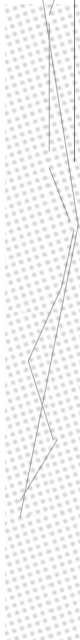
"I'm sure it will serve. I can't tell you," I said, tugging off the horrible, constraining shoes that Kaitei had foisted on us. Like shackles "what a relief the water will be."

"Never fear!" Didion grinned. "Worst comes to worst, we'll simply toss the scupaps and stay up floating."

"Alright. Alright," he said. He watched us, hands folded behind his back. "So... you'll be good?"

"Yes, if you please. Good night."

"Good night!" he haltingly waved, and at last was gone.





The door slid closed. Didion waited a few seconds, and said “Quite snappy, there.”

I jolted the controls and led the litter over to the low wooden benches at the center of the room. “Why is the floor all concrete? I tell you, it’s a hostility.” We helped each other out of the litter to settle on the cushions.

“Are... are they...” He scanned the room, appraising it, and making sure we were alone before he dared to lower his voice. The ambient trickle of water would cover us. “Emel-ry... what are we to do? This feels so beyond us.”

“Face it, I suppose.” I rummaged through the baskets they had left us - water sleeping clothes, biscuits and juice and salve. “Live up to the assignment.”

“No...” He sighed, air heavy in his lungs. “No, this... is not like other audits. This is not like Weylbloom, or any others we could compare it to. Much to bear, for one’s first.”

“Are you tired? I am. Worry once we’ve taken that first step.”

“That step being?”

I looked at him coldly. “Whatever tonight holds. The meet-



ing.”

How quiet it was, but for the distant waterfall roar. God, but that water did look warm, and soft. It was some time until he spoke again.

“Lyly is long since convinced whatever lives here is evil. It will be a strong prejudice to overcome. Are you worried?”

“What? Of them or of her? No, neither. She’s just a skittish one, and... anyway. The answer is only to continue. They will speak to us, tell us of themselves, our duty is to listen. We will learn all we can and bring it to the crew, there is nothing else to do.”

“Sainshand, I mean it! Is the crew something we can trust?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “What! What is this? It’s the only thing we can. We’re trained in this, we...”

“No, we are not. This is new, too new. I don’t trust Lyly with the decision, and Henarl moves with the prefect. Tell me, would you put this in her hands?”

“Our hands.”



"She remains the leader."

"As do I!"

"And I know how... how you feel about her!" he burst out. He looked from side to side - a habit one picks up quickly as a lawship gossip in small, sound-carrying rooms, but we were alone. "I... I don't like moving in shadows either. I'm sorry I've said so much. But... I cannot tolerate pretense here, not with an entire... population at stake."

The dust settled. "Didion... where is this coming from? This force is unlike you"

"Aha, only "

And then the knock at the window came.

Trickle of water. Another sharp rap, a stabbing sound. A rush, like I was under water after all.

"Help me up," I barked. Didion stood unsteadily, and hoisted me into the litter. I pulled him in, and we stood, and all but crashed the thing into the wall to that echoing tapping. "We're here!" I cried, hurting my hands trying to push it open.



“What’s happening?”

“I can’t get it oh God.” But then the thick glass popped open, and Minak’s curious head was pushing through the gap. I rested, winded, on the concrete windowsill as E flutter-fell into the room, talons skittering on the floor.

I turned and collapsed in the litter, sitting as it caught me, to find em nested between us. E burst with chatter straightaway, “Outside ways there are guards and staves. Did you know this?”

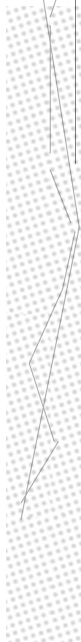
“Guards? Of the staff, you mean?” Didion stammered.

“Big men.” The crow shook his head in erratic, pointed movements, like trying to get a better angle of sight. “Sticks.”

“Surely in case of drowning. Difficulties in the water,” Didion reasoned.

“Irregular. Our litters would do the job of fishing us out better. No, I... surely not, surely they do not mean to bar us in.”

Minak looked at us, waiting. “Ahaps to bar doors, yes. To beat and kettle.”





Didion groaned. "Here it is. Here it is! How could they stoop so low? A show of force?"

"Would you relax? That is so unacceptable I will not even repeat the thought. None would dare. But is there another way?"

"No doors," Minak said. "But we need out. I am to bring you. The king waits in camp, E must speak, and must to night."

"Jesus," he swore. "Hospitality indeed!"

"Stop that. We'll confront them, I won't slink about this night. No deranged esteem they may hold could have them stand against haruspices."

He laughed weakly. "Emelry, we'll break bones soon enough with a simple fall. You'll pick a fight?"

"Ha! I challenge them to!" Suddenly blood was pounding in my head. I was out of my life and into a story, no rules left, "Let's see if they dare! Our mandate stands, nothing interrupts it - we'll determine intent, if they have demands they must speak them. No fear for us, none"

"Right you are." He shook his head, and clung closer to the



handles of the litter. "They could not yet know we know. We'll speak to them regularly?"

But I'd already walked us to the doors - Minak hidden under our blankets.

Sure enough, two men were waiting. They sat on their benches at the far doors, down all the hallway - Aetheotl, and another I didn't recognize, staves their own height resting on the wall.

Aetheotl heard the door slam, and scrambled upright.

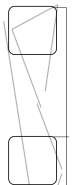
"Oh, hey... having any issues?" He made a show of brushing himself off.

"Sleep was fitful," I said. "We'd like to walk a bit, for some air."

"Air? Aha, is that good for you? I'd be surprised. You have issues with the smell too, right?" He scratched his nose, smiling.

"I'm sure."

"You know, you're not really wet..."





“What?”

“I said... never mind.” He smiled, wry. “Can I do anything for you? Anything you need, the doctor posted us here to handle. Count on it.”

“No, I don’t believe so. But thank you. It will be nice to walk the square, see the streetlights... see all of it, should we not be back again.”

“Listen.” He picked up his stick from the wall, held it in a pose of authority, but stopped short of brandishing it. “I really... doctor’s orders, right, that you needa stay here. It’s dark out, you’re tired, the exertion already... you can’t be stumbling around out there unsupervised.”

“We’re quite rested. There’s still so much of the night.”

He regretfully let his smile vanish. “You need to get back in the tanks, now.”

I summoned everything hard that was in me. I spoke, intoning like I had heard in speeches, “Aetheotl, how little I know you. How little I know of your ties and thoughts. But, I’m sure that you’ve realized what is going on here. Stay silent. Stay silent, the both of you. It is a matter of



months before the See arrives in force. A matter of hours before they know. Either use your hands while you can, or back away. We've plenty of good words yet, and Savannah is opening."

"Use... what?"

I began walking the litter out to the road - his partner stood, but Aetheotl waved him back again. "Stay silent," I said, "Stay here. When the good doctor asks, you can tell the truth - that we stayed here, fast asleep, good the whole night. When your sovereign asks... think on that."

Wide-eyed, stonelike, he watched us go.

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There were no roads into the woods. Dusk had fallen, the spine sun faded grey out of the sky. The town that claimed to be the only trace of acknowledged civilization upon Savannah ended at the borders of Fisher Valley. The town was a stopgap, a footprint, no reason to edge into the deeper wilds, if Razina was to be believed, so it was dark, and rough, and bitter out there. In the night.

Didion and I lay low in the litter, branches skittering off



the arced glass of the raised roof-shield. It was hard running. Velvet reinforcements and state-of-the-art hydraulics aside, we were battered, our backs would be out for a week. I watched the dull line of the turned-off sun continue to hang above us, faintly. Minak's lantern, swaying high above us in the trees as E glided from peak to peak. How easy would it have been to close ones eyes and simply drift along - as transport was meant to happen, in shuttles burrowed inside that sun.

Our litter tumbled through the undergrowth. Minak clutched eir little light in those carved beak grooves, locked in - the distant sound of wrought-iron clanking. E swept with us, a shadow within shadow, for what seemed like hours. Twigs cracked beneath the litter's hard legs; leaves bit at our skin.

My sense of smell was returning. It should not have. Perhaps it was only the henna - something on Minak reeked of it - its unique molecular structure cutting through the sensory blocks and reaching my soul, it felt. It was pungent, smelt of ink, night, dust. It was not the rancidity of life, but the dust-smell of the shells that life takes. Smoke on the air, distant clouds of it.

When we broke into the clearing it was abruptly. The light



rising from it we saw painted in distant treetops a minute before we arrived, cut to pieces by the swinging shadows of the other trees. "Ahead! Ka," Minak called - E was far above us, muffled by the branches, but that cry was like a clarion in the night. "We are here and there."

I slowed the litter; Didion reflexively shifted closer to me. Kneeling forward to push away the last of the branches by hand, we arrived at the camp of the king.

Yet more lanterns hung from the high branches, of the same design that Minak carried. An entire... facility had been constructed. Tent-cloths strung between the high branches formed a sort of high roof that trapped the light; many branches were connected by beams of wood carved for hanging hooks and easy perch, beds of neat straw covered by hard clean reed-boards formed a floor. Parcels, tied in nets, were strung from the trees and left in piles upon the ground - some overgrown and uncared for, as if they had sat here some time before being returned to. Others were new, freshly carved or carpented, such as the great table that lay at the far end of the clearing.

There were ravens in the trees, standing on the branches from which the lanterns hung. One was heavysset, in a bold red and orange vest, with wings sheathed in the same fab-



ric. One was scrawny, beak pitted and worn like Minak's was, but more frayed. One eye was blind with cataract, and E was unclothed but for the strings of jewelry that snaked around eir whole body. There, another carried a smoking censer of sorts by a long trail of knotted and painted cord, their face obscured by some sort of blank helmet — but among them all, it was clear who we had come to meet.

Eir feathers were greyed and sparse, run with dark-brown streaks, caked in neatly-applied henna along the wings and face — thick, durable markings almost equivalent in splendor to the ultraviolet shimmer present in half the other's coats. But this was the king. E looked up at us from where E sat at work.

The crows dropped down, one by one, around the table. Their wingbeats as they landed stirred the refuse of leaves and twigs at the edges of the floor mats, far more powerful than their small frames seemed capable of. All turned to look at us, all flanked around the one who sat upon the table, who was the smallest of all.

Bathed in lamplight, E carefully with curled talons folded shut the pages they had been poring over. Deftly, E tucked them back into the stacks of books. As E stood, the heavysset raven cried out, “Book king of Quay, hi Kali,



city-pon-wake!"

No bows or other acknowledgement. The declaration fell hollow but remained there, hovering in the night.

Kali stood, and dipped into a pocket of eir dense loose shawl, pulling out a pair of little glasses, gold-framed, sparkling. In a fluid movement e'd nudged them onto eir face, supported by the few small, neat carved grooves in eir beak, and blinked at us.

"You did not," Kali said, "bring your speaker. And I've come to speak."

"Apologies. It was I who was called," I stammered, suddenly overcome with how quiet the fires of this clearing were, compared to the gallop here, "and our scribe is fit for this meeting. I... apologize if your expectations were otherwise."

"No," E said, coolly. "No, not at all. No formalities here. Sit, you and your machine, whatever best."

I pushed the litter forward into a full rest; its knees sunk into the earth and buckled at the unfamiliar softness - Diddion, in the meantime, scrambled with the console on his





side of the bed. “May we record this meeting? Our crew waits above. I’d like to stream this to them, remain together.”

Kali nodded, arching eir neck to look down at us. “Very well. You’ve come to meet us in the deep dark, ka, by all means take notes. I’ve thought so often of this time. I’ve prayed ten years of how to begin. This is not the first meeting, but the most official between human and tengmunnin thus far... I say. So, I’ve something of a loss, how was I to know you would accept? I wasn’t.”

“I wasn’t either,” I said. “A tall ask.”

E jerked their beak at Didion. “Thoughts of going to the staff? Evidently never, but did you want to work with them more? To not conceal the fear and shock?”

“The shock of learning of you? No, that isn’t quite...” I trailed off, then snapped back to lay out a plan. “I’ll start here. How much do you know of the happenings above? If we need to cover any ground...”

“Everything,” E answered without hesitation, “Our fliers and technicians have the caps mapped good. We have access to it all, their systems are ours. The whole opera of re-



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N1BICE2  
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202BEND1  
112NW  
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ords and reports, don't worry about it. Your ship as well."  
E paused, cocked eir head. "Disapprove?"

"Kali," Didion hazarded, "since we arrived the staff has been less than amenable to our presence. That we've come should tell you where we stand. There's a resentment there, an evasiveness. People don't trust invasions, it's expected with any audit, but here, and with the staff, it was wrong from the beginning. We saw the marks of deeper life, of something grand and strange... they dance around it with classical corporatism and grand niceties, but no. There was never the option of asking the staff directly what... I'm sorry, what you were. The choice was between our own espionage, or a direct report to the See."

"Good!" Kali cried, cutting off the last syllables of Didion's sentence. "Good, good choice. I knew your kind would listen."

I bristled at that. "Kali," I said. "When Minak fetched us from the station... E mentioned E was nine. Why do you bring children to speak with us? If there is some assumption being made..."

E stood, hopped around the table looking for the words. "No, now this is my desperation, Minak is an adult. Listen.





Don't think like that. I name your people familiar because you fly, because you live far from the core, because you are scholars and priests. Human and tengmunin are wide conditions, but separate in their fundamentals. There are different rules. Different how, different deaths. I'm fifteen and elderly, Emelry. I'm cut like a flower."

Amber light flickered on cloth.

"Harka!" Kali snapped, and the heavysset one promptly hopped up to stand by em on the table. "Harka was born in my clutch, the same season. I have spent my whole life reading without break, E has been my arm. Minak, you've met, E joined us at five, a defector from the plains of the Third. Already E was a skilled and able scout. Read it as decades of experience. Likin," E raised a broad wing up towards the one draped in silvery jewelry, "A singer, a chronicler, celebrity, caretaker. Nineteen and flies as well as I, without my condition. Fili " the last, with eir rainbow cord, "- of six proud summers of service. All of us and I promise are as grown as yourself. We are quick, sharp, grave, never mistake it! Our greatest strength and greatest injustice. If we were less bound up, if we had lives like yours... oh, perspective, perspective. I wish I could call it natural. I wish that the breath of time we're given would





be enough, would be whole enough in our hearts, and that you were the ones that seemed ancient and stagnant. But no. Ka! Kaka, Weylbloom... there it was proven what span a soul was meant for. That a century is proper and exact. We're diminished to a fifth of that, can you understand that? Souls cut short? Trapped, hungry? If it were different, I would not be who I am. I would not be so burning burnt. I would be happy I would sit and build in the cage arcs. But no. No." E puffed eirself up, each feather on eir chest seemed to swell. "This is what you will do. This is the change you will help effect. Ruin our patrons, and deliver us the sun. I demand it by millions of years, I beg it from my bones. Make a fist."

"How do you know so much?" Didion asked, resettling himself closer to me, towards the litter's front. "No disrespect meant. But in this cage, how have you accomplished so much? I know nothing of your life and deeds. You speak as so familiar with the world. The wider world. I know you, uh, infiltrated the staff systems, but how did you get there? You speak sure and cosmopolitan."

Kali slowly drew one wing up towards eir face - covering eir body, and slowly blinking eir black, fire-glinting eyes. "A land of secrets. Harka, tell them a walk through Quay."





Harka cocked eir head back and forth, back and forth, like cracking one's neck before work. "Savannah is wide. Down the river from this town we've built our own and are expanding. From the middle lake we've flown here. There is our capital of Quay. A hundred thousand live there working and building and studying. We are builders. The wide plains above us hold more people, the claimed Third, and the recluse city of the far end that is Quarry. But our capital is Quay, the library city."

"We have flown," Minak chirped, "three weeks shifts. Timed arrived at yours. First was I!"

"I thought I recognized your voice. When I saw you... when we met, at the Valley, your voice. I thought it was you. I told myself that, well, were you the only, or were your voices identical..." No, what was I saying. Immediately each of them had been distinct at the clearing. Minak spoke gravely and harsh, lilting amused squawks. But Harka sounded nearly human with eir smooth and deep voice, and Kali sang like wind chimes, like microtones, at every word. E took back the explanation.

"Sixty years ago we were released from the worse confinement of the old rooms. Generations have lived and died since, centuries relative of our quick overclocked hearts.



Sixty years ago the landscape of Savannah was livable. We watched as stone and mud poured from the sky, as the janitors assembled our pristine mountain vistas. Strange worlds make you learn fast.

“Fifty years ago, when this hull was still a skeleton, a foreigner arrived. A human fugitive, a solar man rejected by his kind after failing the measure of omanhood. Quay is built around his old ship and personal library. Our royalty styled itself after his example. My predecessors, each king of Quay, has spent their lives reading and singing and watching and wading through the regolith of human knowledge we have. That is all. Luck and study and fire alone.”

“The sword,” Likin said, speaking for the first time in a high vizier’s croak, tinkling as E shifted eir weight from claw to claw on the high branch E remained at, “of all knowledge. The fire of the grave tree, do not mistake it’s of for pretension airs. It is the science of legendscraft and the art is living.”

“Of which we may speak of as friends,” Kali said, cutting em off. Likin stayed motionless, with the same stare. “But as it stands.”



Didion, wavering, said, "It is hard to give advice here. You place in my hands... no. In our hands - our, I mean, all of us gathered, and all who will hear the story - there is already the fate of a species. How could we even approach...?"

"I don't want to see it that way. Every soul is a heathen vessel, every one. Our sun was filtered, but we too have grown in the one light. We sing paper and fire the same," Kali said, eir gaze lost in the auburn leaves. "I have such this pride that... listen. This esteem. There's nothing alien here, nothing strange, I don't want to be strange. My new friends, I want your duty from you. I want this audit to remain as an audit, for us to be integrated into the Ecumene. As Weylbloom was, and Nadir, and Far Pale, and Lune."

Didion frowned. "Is this not about independence? independence. About claiming Savannah as a world for yourselves, building a history here."

E shook his head, like shaking off water. "I want to strap sundrives to this place and ram it into the surface of Ares, let history grow from its hatched shell. Unfold the landscape here as a valley in the trenches. That will never happen. But I have no love for this place. It is beautiful, it provides, but... now, you will excuse me to the architect, but Savannah is hardly a work of art, hardly a homeland.



None of the bones of the Heath tapestry, not built for every roof to have a story as proper habitats. One large field."

"I'm gone! Scratch it!," one of the tengmu in back said, hopping forward to join us. It was Fili, speaking from behind eir featureless mask. "Quarry's gone too. People are scratching at walls desperate, far from corridors, and here we are doing the same with words! The city I left is built of scrap torn from the walls. Soon they will breach the null rooms, and conquer Third fields. And dream of cargo and void."

"We are on a timer," Kali said, "if you know."

E was right. Too right. Forget the talk of short years - with the worst luck, we would have only the night. Surely Razina had guessed, and certainly, after our flight, one on the staff knew that we knew.

Kali caught my quiet. "Emelry. Before we talk more of courses. I want to show you something. You are the one I looked for first - this is because of your role. You have been schooled in the sight?"

"I... well. If you mean..."



"I do."

"If it's about reading her share of the instruments," Didion added, "'the sight' seems a bit grand..."

"Scribe does not know? The craft is yours, but I, if it were I, would move to be past the secrets. Unless it's valuable to keep, that's you."

Both of them were staring at me. "No, no, you're right. It comes to be known among crews at some point, if they are... good ones, functional ones. Didion I trust. But how did you hear tell?"

Harka cawed sharply in the background, and was silenced by a glance from king Kali - who slowly, steely gazed back at me."

"Nymphs are born in the science of wonder. Our blue, the lavender arts, it's a product feature. Selling gimmick. Make sure we could take care of ourselves, maybe. Nothing to react to, here, no mineral but in whatever the Quarriers may or may not have plundered. I'm speaking bitter. The point is that the wonder is how we dream and hold ourselves, how we see the world before adulthood - do you see?"



"Are you saying you once... live in the state? In unbroken perception? How?"

"How. It is simply there. There's no words," E said, as if vaguely bothered that I'd asked.

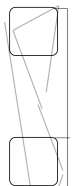
"It's formless, flying. You know," Harka said, hopping a little closer to our circle. "We hatch and dream. It is beautiful, in the moment and to look back upon, but I see what you're thinking — it would be unbearable, for you! And I would never go back to it."

"Nor I. It's ache and silence. No body in the words," from Minak. The rest of the group made little gestures of assent.

"It's interesting, what we got instead of childhoods," Kali said. "That age is a heady memory of wildness, of animal instinct, of... a mind flayed to the curve of the ground, all corners of the sky. There's an old pain there. Nymphs - empty apsara husks."

Didion shook my shoulder. "Emelry? What... what are we talking about? Flaying?"

Kali clearly would do me no favors in explaining this, so I began. "My detector. The only real lieutenant tool. Um,





you see, it's less of a violet mechanism in and of itself, it's more of a meditative focal point trigger for an internal dissociative state of direct soul-narrative interaction, and..."

I caught my breath and made sure to slow down, "and it is disorienting. Very disorienting. Three hours a week is more than one could be asked to bear. What Kali is telling me is that tengmu childhoods are spent entirely in this state, this... pre-ego fugue?"

Kali cut me off, sudden and sharp. "Look at my eyes." Tentatively, I obeyed. Didion scowled, offended, not having parsed the explanation at all. But I turned to Kali, finding her deep black gaze, in that low, low light. And before I could -

We were. The world died.

It was scorching brink of rain season before the clouds broke. Cold light hot. How could it be so hot? My coat felt like it was burning down in the dust and rabble of the yellow ground. I combed through stalks and stones. I chased grasshoppers and broke the paper-candy shells of snails. I ran lithe and edgeborne and adapted, as easy as air, as easy as without air - my claws were long and thin.

It was rain season and I saw people weaving under the





canopy oilskins. I couldn't tell their faces apart no matter who I was they were like stones, like little shadows of angels, puppets, boats, blank as statue molds.

The sun glowed a dull blue at night just enough so you could see before you.

How it feels to grow up homeless and with no need for a home, no conception of what a home is, no image of inside and outside, inside the great cage, inside the wheel of heaven pierced by an arrow of light, the sacrilege you only learn in later years of the undone fragment of god called time, the arrow, the anti-center banished, the seed of separation and the point of pain.

I ate crabs by the river when their young were overflowing. I stabbed them and pried them apart just by opening my mouth. I was still looking into my eyes, Kali's pupils, I choked out, "How?" and we said, "I'm just reading aloud. We can stop," but I was not ready to stop and then I was in the sky.

The fog was beginning to clear. My mind at the edge of my mind was waking. There were words and calls and thoughts that did not vanish behind me, that I was carrying like an armful of stones rather than a suit of clothes.





I was so high, in the middle of the sky, light and sound, green blue white green winter leaves like being in a room and something was wrong.

From behind? Below? Around me I heard Harka call, eir voice distant, no/move/no/red/shape in the half-language of nymphs.

red/move/move I cried but my wing was already broken and the world spinning, delirium, derision.

Kali broke away from me. Eir fire was gone from me again, disappeared like sunlight turning out behind closed eyes

like when you lay there in your bunk, dozing out the window all christs, where was this coming from, how old was I...? When the ambient spin of the port turns like a whale in the sunlight. Morning news with cheery officer talking over drone footage sweeping across the outer surface of the town, floating there, a mountain covered in houses.

How habitats, being inside them, feels like the walls are gonna collapse on you, swallow you up like a storage-bay gate slamming shut. And stations felt like being inside a warm house when it's raining outside like the jug-month slipstream storms, tearing over the heavy covered library walls, its branches tied in holy cord so the wind wouldn't



damage them, fifty skeletons you had known by name strewn in the lamplit rafters.

Grandfather's funeral. Funneling his ashes into his porcelain flagstone decorated with the honor ribbons of ten year's Admin-sector service, the long drift home with it tied between the porters sons and daughters of his crewmembers from the corps through the streets where the townspeople peeked out of their doors at the procession. Unpacking the grave wall in our family's shrine room, fitting him in next to our other beloved.

A frog raw from the river. Killifish. Sandy raspberries. Birch bark. Cold murky water and grainy silt on your beak.

I was at home. I was eight. Second shift had just ended for the day and in the typical rush of activity down the flocks of neotenes through the main tunnel corridors. I took a detour from the loop branch of the station as a shortcut to the residential layer I'd sneak through the hydroponics alleyways and got distracted by the sudden cool moisture in the air, the clanking-hum that showed up in the stations motion-sections, the garden barrel turning and the racks of produce clung to the rim of the walls. All around me was green and dew, this small, turning room filled with carrots and parsnips in black soil planters, waterberries in





thick bushy clumps with the lights shining through them. No one was on duty. It was just me, and the sound of water running down the stone-paved drainage gutters, back into the town's water system.

I was curious. I dropped down into the verdancy, letting the spin carry me. It was the first time I had ever felt weight, and my heart skipped as if someone had seized me. But the air was sweet and I was home.

And just as my mind woke, I came to, and was in the clearing again, Kali nuzzling eir head into the crook of my neck.

"What happened to her?" Didion shouted, almost standing in the litter. "Are you alright? What did you do?" Harka hopped before him with one outstretched wing—the most human gesture I had seen from them yet. It was unsettling,

Kali spoke to me low and steady. "I could fly that high when I was a nymph. Even when my mind was in that state, I chose to do it, to chase high. I meditate on that the rest of my life. It is like—" E said, hopping back from me again to perch on the litter's railing—"it is like... do you ever worry about who you are? Not your path, or moral choices, but of your essence? Our essence is already patterned in these dreams. The ones we come back to. The anchors of



the practice, you know? We are slaves to it, and we remember that.”

“How kind and cruel. How similar, aha,” I laughed weakly, staring at my lap. E was right. There was something similar there. Anchors - core principles you hang your personality on while learning wonderwork, to reinforce and stabilize internal perception. Essential beliefs, traits, memories. A tengmu nymph... if I understood, through animal adrenaline and a soul to grow into, lived their first years in a way where the entire time spent would be “locked in” as that kind of pillar. Building themselves around their own relationship with old, outgrown instincts, unable to make new anchors themselves? This was too much. I would have to consult with Anahit, so much of this was more her field than mine. “Would you return with us?” I asked once I knew the world was not fading. Didion, in the lamplight, quietly straightened up but otherwise did not react.

Kali stared at me, utterly motionless. “What?”

“To our ship. We could take you a few hours in the claustrophobia of this litter’s cargo compartment,” I patted the machine beneath me. “We would leave our supplies, have you settle in, anywhere we could be seen. But we should do it. I believe we need to become very serious, very quick-



ly.”

“Why do you propose this?”

“The See is what you wish to contact? Directly into arbi-  
trations?”

E slowly shrugged his equivalent of shoulders – the equivalent of a nod.

“Then it should be you who speaks with them. We can give overviews, general ideas – only you can say what you mean. I... I can do my best. I can approximate. But you can sing that.”

E thought. And then - in what I would come to recognize as the basal tengmu “smile” - pointed eir beak straight to the sky.

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“Will you be comfortable? I’m so sorry, again.”

“It will be comfortable! Very. I like small spaces, and look -” from what appeared to be an awkward crouching position, Harka spread eir wings and turned slowly, demonstrating how spacious the cargo area was. Didion had spent a few



minutes tinkering, and was able to turn the auxiliary lights brighter and constant. "As long as I can breathe, we should do what we must. I will use your blankets here."

"Good. And eat the rations too. Anything there you're welcome to."

Harka laughed, ka, rung out in a dense barrel echo.

And from there it was only up. A round of curt farewells - Aethotl pitchingly nervous and on guard, taking refuge in formalities, Razina distracted with the work of the week and the pace of organization finding itself again. I couldn't help but smile to myself as we left - a retired farmer, she insisted, but there had been a job change besides into a kind of post-retirement museum curator, micromanaging the project like a bride. They let us go without much fanfare.

Didion and I took our pills, I having refused the syringe without Kaiter's steady hands, so fitful falling dreams took me for the long ride up. And then we were there again, in the upper stations, as if we'd only left moments ago - that eerie blue sleeping glow letting us know it was night into early morning. We made our way back, first walking the litter, then riding it as it kicked off from wall to wall all the



way back to the ship.

Umihotaru waited, proud and long.

As soon as the outer airlock rolled open Bettany was there. She had evidently waited right here for us, in the center of the doorway, eyes darting between every inch of us both before speaking.

"You're back. We've been drafting the letter. In, please." She locked the door behind us as if preparing for voyage, closing the great padlock fast the minute we had loaded the litters back in. When it was closed, Harka promptly unfolded emself from the storage compartment and tumbled gracelessly into the room. E spread eir wings cooly, surveying the room, eyes darting as E found balance in the unweight.

Bettany stared only a moment before regaining her composure. "Lord Harka. Well, words fail me, as I'm sure you understand. My most earnest welcome to this little vessel; treat it as you would a home should it please you."

"Prefect, your words refresh me already. I will be here. I will be."



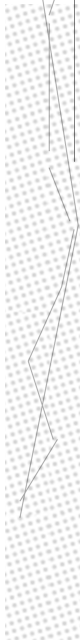
"We are immeasurably privileged. I will prepare. Emelry, we will be in the kitchen, for safety's sake, smaller windows, you know..." She nodded at me, ducking her jittery head as if apologizing.

"I suppose she'd like to jump right into it..." Didion mumbled, watching after as she scurried in.

Harka snapped eir beak. "What? That's well. I am rested and waited, we'll direct."

I followed Didion's gaze into the bulk of the ship, down the long hallway that ran from the airlock to library. For a moment it seemed so clean and still that it felt like I was again stepping onto it for the first time, like all those scant months ago. How was it that all that time of the voyage blended together, and seemed shorter yet than the mere week we'd spent here?

I'd approached the voyage as if it was another class. A practice session, acclimation to void travel, a diversionary theoretical foray into preparations for a project so grand it seemed then to be negligible. The absurd, absurd idea that a true world could live here. I took it as a positive that I felt no shame for that.





Didion and Harka shuffled together by an open cubby, sorting out the little paper-and-twine package the king had entrusted us with after refusing the call to come - the leather-bound notebook, a full crow skeleton lovingly linked bone by bone with fine metal rings. I was oblivious for a moment as I thought, and then I saw Anahit's face appear and disappear at the library threshold.

"Excuse me a moment, I'll fetch the speaker. Didion, I'll leave things to you."

"Right!" he said. "Right, right."

In a moment I was there, and found her curled with her back at the wall. She stared at me - that look on her face, the one she has when wounded and too proud to admit so in her heart. "Why, Emelry?" she hissed to me, tense and quiet, like a girl. "How could you think like this?"

"I - I'm sorry? I've only returned, I know the visit -"

"Not the visit! This... this... this..." she trailed off, unwilling to say something cruel, but then said with sudden force. "No. This is so far beyond. This is not how I thought we would do this."



I put a hand on her shoulder. "Anahit... Anahit, you must not worry. There is so much to do, so much to learn, and surely a fight. But we make sanctuary now. It is a speaker's role to -"

"Don't tell me about that! Not by the mandate of my role! How could you do this, bring it here, when from the beginning I've told you, shown you, Emelry, the sourness here, the emptiness!" She was all but a few degrees of passion away from flailing her arms around in nervous fit. "The scrys still read dark, and you bring their subjects here after one conversation?"

"What choice could we have? They came to us desperate."

"The choice of caution! The choice of audit process, lieutenant, that we have to parse things like this by. This is why the format exists, why each role functions as they do - you've been acting as lieutenant, liaison, speaker at once, as if... ugh. And now you've chosen our side for us. What can we know, what could we possibly know so soon? What are we to do now that protocol has been so abandoned? Reckless!" she said, the last word seethed out.

"This is beyond an audit, you know that. It's staring at you. We are being pulled, willing or no, so deep into the



future... You're not arguing for caution, you're arguing for panic and paralysis. Its too desperate to not move."

"Wrong." She couldn't decide on where to settle her eyes. "You just think something strange here makes you special, and you can't see anything now."



In the kitchen, I let Didion talk. I let everyone talk. I hung back, first speaking only when spoken to.

Henarl was lost in himself as well. He barely reacted to Bettany as he usually did, staring at his feet rather than that steely pan of a gaze I knew from him. Anahit sat quiet, and smiling so naturally that it was uncanny. Didion and Bettany were the ones taking charge, animated and throwing themselves around the room as they paced and exclaimed - and Bettany would not let me shrink for long.

"So. I believe I have a checklist. Lavender matters, politics above and below, but really, Emelry, you are going to have to explain what this experience was."

"Right, well..." Why were they looking at me like that? "The lieutenant role has a sort of special technique used in our



deliberations. The tengmu are fully lavender-compatible, and have something similar innate. The extent... will take some time to chart. So little of this has been studied."

Bettany asked, "Hold, all of them?"

"All," Harka said. "Roan songs and blue dreams, it's assumed. Less spiritual, as you, a new sense instead. Magnet vision. Seasonal visualization, lyric encryption."

"What are you talking about? Not spiritual?" Anahit asked, her voice soft. "How could soulwork not be spiritual? I don't believe that."

Harka only cocked eir head again. "The point being. Are only lieutenants taught to do what we do?"

God, their eyes were all so heavy. "Yes," I said, "I believe so. By official channels. I'm sure there are some outliers who have found it otherwise, but... the training is very specific. It would be difficult to orchestrate when outside of academy setting. And... I believe the tengmu capacity is different. Deeper."

Anahit scoffed, "Deeper how?"

"Well... it was more than wonder. This was... a capabili-



ty we pretend at. Sometimes hope towards. But we haven't dreamed correctly of it. It was... the true encoding of thought. Not - not the reverse-engineered decoding that the detector facilitates. But a true transmission of qualia."

"Wait," Bettany said.

"No, I must. I... what I felt there..."

Henarl coughed with surprise. A deep chime from the loudspeakers, Bettany stared at the newly-opened video channel in awe. "No, this... damn. Emelry, how did she...?"

We don't have the time for this."

The screen flickered on. Kuryo redname clung alone to one of the pillars outside the ship, hailing us by voice over and over.

"I'm showing up," Redname crackled over the interface, "for consultation with your speaker. As you've recommended. Let me on, I know your party just got back."

"Oh, God," Didion whispered from next to me.

Bettany pushed forward towards the screen, staring at her. "Right, well, terrible timing as always. What do we do?" Before anyone could respond, Redname moved. She scanned



her surroundings, and pulled the skull around her neck from the folds of her cloak. "Let me on. Now, c'mon."

"Let her," Harka said, batting the air to stabilize eirself.

"Let her on."

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"What, are you gonna make me wait in the airlock again?"

she grinned, pulling off her cloak. "That was so rude. I can barely believe it."

Bettany looked at her evenly. "It was irregular both times, chief."

"Did you keep me here the first time because they were already here? Or was it just over tech access, haha."

"We aren't discussing that," Bettany snapped.

"No, I get it. That answers it." She stretched, making a show of taking up space here, again looked confidently to the inner door. "And the jig's up now, so... let me in and let's talk."

I crossed my arms with apparently misplaced confidence - Bettany turned sharply, letting a glare flicker on only after





she was no longer facing her, and swept into the kitchen with the door still open. Kuryo smiled, nodded at me, and followed.

“Ka!” Harka saw her before I’d followed in turn. I was left clinging to the threshold as this silly group made assembly. “And the staff enters stage! At center and with, how, it’s you.”

“Harka, right? You should be thanking me.”

“Threats veiled and not, name your angle, fire maker! Ka!”

She spoke to Bettany. “I’m obviously not here on staff’s behalf, alright? I’m one of the few people who are gonna be real with you here, because we aren’t getting past this easy. Now, I’m here to talk.”

“No. No, what is this?” Bettany waved dismissively between the two visitors. “You’re explaining that first, before we begin ‘talk’. How much do you know, how do you know of one another - what is happening?”

“Drone girl,” Harka snapped, head fixed like a spearpoint at Kuryo. “Takes her toys and plays with the rejects. Pretends to be a prophet angel. She has nothing to tell you.”





"Did they tell you anything, by the way? Or are they still maintaining the position of nothing existing but their city."

"The details of the political situation," I said, "have been explained to us. I personally assure you, Redname, that there has been no duplicity. You arrived during our deliberations of how to proceed at the news, it's all very delicate, as I'm sure you're keenly aware. If you're committed to honesty, then cards on the table, please."

"She doesn't know us. Subterfuge and fear. Not the plains or proper."

Kuryo looked at me, brows dramatically raised. "Well? Can I talk?" I nodded to Harka, who put eir hackles down, and she continued. "Thanks. Now, I want to get one thing straight, to all of you. This guy has come to you as a representative of Quay, and I'm sure the scribe and lieutenant will fall into that role too. But I'm not on staff. I'm... I'm here as a representative of the Third."

Harka broke into a long, cawing laugh, shaking the room with a sharp echo it wasn't built to handle. "Ah, I see. This is where we are. You lie; you stand with Quarry. The Third is overtaken, easy pickings, now subsumed into the engine entirely. Of course they would be! Dreamers. Was there



once a culture there? A breathing tradition? Perhaps, but no more than is the baseline of heart. Nowadays, it is all those who forget both cities. Those who reject the challenge of flourish. They go to the plains to dream again and eat from the dirt, to roll in the water wet, and mock the grace of soul.”

“The Third is the most advanced lavender practitioners in creation,” Kuryo coolly stared towards Anahit, missing not a beat in her answer. “What pieces that Quay has eked out of their books, my folks totally live in. I started... living with them because I wanted to study their language; they don’t speak Akkadu like the Quays, so - “

“They truly don’t?” Kaitei asked, cautious. “I don’t understand that. The engineer role is both technical and medical; I’ve studied this, and all we know about the brain-soul tells that knowledge of Akkadu is tied to the development of the speech centers at the fundamental level; as soon as one is theoretically able to speak, the knowledge should flow into them regardless. This is what happened with you, at Quay, no? The presence of a cultural dialect is some proof it wasn’t learned through direct study.” Harka preened eir wingtips, a gesture of agreement.

“That’s the thing. I don’t think, at least for those born into



the life, there are speech centers. It's something else. It's a telepathic, ideatic language, engrammatic song, an order of magnitude different from human language. And," Kuryo said, "it was part of the goal. Nymphhood as a trance state, phased in and out of at will."

Harka seemed uncomfortable, curling eir claws in the air. But E remained quiet, until eventually asking, "Who do you mourn?"

"A friend. She was Thirdish, if you're still attacking my loyalties.."

"She'," Harka squawked. "These ideas. I can't believe it."

Kuryo sighed. "This is the problem."

"Yes, it is!" Harka exclaimed.

Didion had prepared a round of tea upon returning. The bags had sat there, tied to the platter, since we had begun talking. Bettany straightened, took one, was disappointed it was lukewarm. "This is all quite vague. Are we here for a reason, or would you two like to speak privately? All due respect."

"We are well here," Harka said without looking away.





Kuryo nodded. “Yeah. I’m just here to put things on the table.”

“Then can someone tell us the story?”

“She,” Harka cried, “has long forayed into the plains. Posed as a prophet-angel, riled up discontent among the cityless.” E nodded. “Does she do it with approval? I don’t know.”

“I’m not posing as anyone. I’m talking to people I care for.”

“Some care. Ideas, ideas, ideas. Kali has often cursed you on mission.”

“Why? You’re just as brutal as your idols, just waiting for the chance. I’m not spreading anything, trying anything! The plains are just as interested in those in the walls as you are with those outside of them. You’re the one robbing them of options, of ideas! I love that you call em a king, God.”

Harka flapped, tugging at Didion’s shirt, raising eir beak almost straight up. “Appalling! Appalling, appalling, no sense of the project, jailer! A human, encouraging the emulation of humans, who still cries kingdom. The word is



a matter of respect, not power! You will never insult em. Never!"

Kuryo just looked at the wall.

Bettany cleared her throat. "How lovely. Another matter, I want to hear it from a member. Kuryo. You've been here long enough, you're sharp. The cult of the changelings, what is it? Its tenets, goals?"

"And how much of it is your additions?" I added.

"You people..." she sighed, but began regardless. "New Vitalism is this. It's this," she gestured at Harka, "it's... novel life."

"Usual changeling fare, then," Henarl mumbled.

"No. Vitalism is not just new kinds of life, its new modes. What's that mean, it means new ways of living, ways that are currently impossible, currently unexplored. It's... god, do we have to talk about this with em in the room?"

Bettany opened her mouth and laughed like I've never heard her laugh before. A sharp, high, incredulously cruel laugh that went on a second longer than was appropriate. She let it echo, simply smiling and continuing to listen to



Kuryo. Harka quietly shifted the claw e was perched by.

“Yes, then,” Kuryo said, after having failed to stare our prefect down. “It’s about different cycles, different skies, in the ways the world hasn’t managed to be different yet. The tengmu are a different mode of life. An entire new language, as we’ve been going over... look, for how long has the world been about the same bullshit, sun and moon and all the rest of the framework. How long have its leaders forced... no, not forced, embodied this single lens.”

“We asked you for a description of the cult,” I interrupted, “Not a sermon from it. You know that isn’t true. The human rainbow...”

“Yes, yes, obviously the rainbow, that’s what I’m talking about. The one light of white Adonai with everything in its place, duh. This is what we mean, this is what new means!” she seethed, “A second light. A second light, to disprove the monolithic purity and... parity of the empire. It’s an antithesis, a partner...”

“This sounds empty,” Didion said. “A whole species just to prove a point. It doesn’t follow.”

“What, is a species born to rot in rock mines better? Is



that more noble? Did our creators magically know what our place would be? No, the story rises from the nature it's given." This was almost sad to watch. Insecurity over artificial heritages was so typical of old women like her, born in places still spiritually yoked. That's... that's why! God, I'm on your side, this is all old..! I'm with you. I'm with you. I don't apologize for the staff here. I've lived here, I've done what I can, I stand with the crows. I know where I am, but you will trust that. We're past debates, we're past everything. We're in it now."

Harka grumbled. "Then your time in the Third. How how am I to believe you aren't evangelizing for the staff there. Stewing the flames already there. What could have turned you? Pet."

She brushed em off. "Please. No one here is innocent of angling for position. The doors have been open for a while, culture inside has never been isolated or pristine. You literally evangelize you literally set up those encampments right in the middle of herdland and... whatever, we'll save the squabbles. Judge me as a foreigner, not an alien."

"But the wolf in a new land ceases to be a hunter. He takes on the debt of a king," I quoted



“Why! Are you like this! You’re already pulling out Yaya at me? This is hopeless.”

Harka said “I’ve come here to advocate. It’s what we agreed. You’ll not take -”

“No,” Kuryo boomed. So full and loud that Harka flinched, startling back on eir perch with feathers in disarray. “No. This is Savannah and I have just as much right to ‘advocate’. It’s my home too. Hell, if we’re being real, there’s barely more tengmu than human staff here, it’s still a small case. And if we’re moving forward with this, I’m not leaving anyone behind, I’m not just capitulating to your king. We’re doing it right, from the beginning.”

“Small?” I pushed back. “It’s not near the human population, surely, but we are discussing a matter of... millions.”

“No. No, she’s right,” Anahit bobbed along as if she didn’t hear me. “The details can fall into place later. But... I saw it in my scrys, you know, I missed it the first time. There’s the chain of settlements along the river, right? But there’s also the plains, and the great cluster at the far end. I didn’t understand that, it put my numbers wrong?”

“What? Anahit? We have a responsibility here. Weren’t





you..."

"Wasn't I what?" she beamed. "Obviously we're all trepidatious, right? But this makes sense."

I watched helplessly as everyone nodded in assent, how the whole crew just accepted such boldfaced maneuvering. They were smarter than this. Even for Anahit and Didion's fragility, even for Henarl and Bettany's callousness, and not even mentioning Kaitei the most solid of us all, each of them were smarter than this. Each of them knew how to think - why, how could they possibly go along with this?

I was worried. I was very, very worried. Kali had been wrong, there must have been... some echo. Some reverberation, something new found. What I'd seen with the king, Kuryo had found years ago and perfected.

"Here's what it is. If we're all working together now," I rushed to say. I took point at what center I could find in the room, moving so that all eyes would be on me. "We need to know what we want to do with the big issues. The things we can agree on. Sever and Cote, those are the two power centers of human Savannah as I've seen it. Two cultural complexes around them both, and before we determine a course towards the interior, we must have a pic-





ture here, proposals made for how to handle each. How much we are willing to give. Next step we call the See and announce formal hostility and a request for arbitration - once we're there, we can take command of Savannah forthwith. Let's call it here tonight. Kuryo, Harka, we've spare quarters plenty. Let's rest. Let's think. Weigh what you've heard, and get to work on research." I looked up to Bettany for approval - she silently nodded.



The ship slept. Didion had crashed quickly, worn and exhausted from the one long pounding bruise that was the visit - a bruise that set into me just the same, though the marrow-deep ache was only painful. Like cracks of fire in every bone, but I hardly felt it. The pain was there, really I felt it fully, but the bad part of pain couldn't touch my mind that night. Like there was some barrier, some impossible distance between myself and my body

I lay in the library. I'd tethered myself so that I could rest on the glass of the window, needing the juvenile comfort of my utility sash close around me. Setting a bone, I chuckled to myself.

"I call," I heard a caw from the threshold.



"Ah, Harka." I turned against my cloth, slow and careful to reposition myself. "I thought you'd boarded in the supply room."

"Yes. Close and still and useful. I like the packages, all your things and crafts." With a few small waves of his wings e was near to me. "Don't judge. I'm fluttering into a storybook."

"Ha. Library and library," I smiled. "Apologies if you were looking to be alone here. Is there anything I could help you find?"

The tengmu looked at things with heads posed sideways, as a rule. Perhaps they weren't quite as predator as humans, or even owls, I suppose. Their obsidian little eyes always seemed quizzical, fresh and clean. This close to em, it really was shocking just how crow they truly were. Some animal part of my mind, the one built to put human faces to peoples' names, still reflexively saw tengmu as drones of a sort, even now. Mouthpieces, online avatars, with some strange but human culture remotely behind them. But in the low orange nightlights of the library, glinting off all our little luxuries of glass and filigree, I watched em breathe, eir feathers rise and fall. Like cat's fur, like leaves in a tree.



"I came to look but not to read. Lieutenant. You remember. How we said of fliers." Another subtle motion of eir wings, and eir claws scrabbled at the featureless corner of the window, somehow finding purchase on the smooth brass. "A flier is a special role, not all who fly are. It's a word for messenger, carrier, seer, explorer. Who finds things in the sky, words and names in air. In the upper sky, where unweight is, one can glide for days without exertion and fall into bluesight the whole way. Any number of accesses and passages to the great rooms of the builders, but I've never been there. I've never seen stars."

"And I've spent my whole life with no sky but for stars," I said, not hiding my amusement. "They're beautiful in the same way anything natural is beautiful; you get used to it."

Ee paused in a way that I imagined was very slightly offended. "Used to the neighbors! Don't say such."

"Oh, most of all! Even that becomes just another field of history... look," I pointed to one star, a favorite of mine.

"Do you see that? Thuban - there, the soft green one, fading in and out."

"Ah. Ah, yes."



"I've read about them most. One of the most elaborate dyonspaces recorded - like a mandala of tangled string, thousands of planets worth of mass. And all they broadcast is their music, absolutely nothing else, just centuries of music. Baffling variety. All picked apart. By the see's standards, a fully realized and whole culture... maybe they found their calling and turned to angels."

"Scales of drama, ka," e laughed. "That's good. That's very good. Millions of years of song, right to you."

"To anyone here. To us," I shrugged.

Together we watched the stars gently, slowly, inexorably turn.



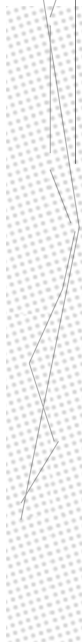


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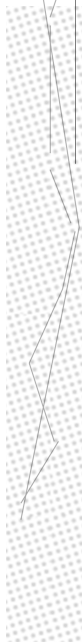
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NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuosity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation

**NOTES**



whose change from *The Bears* is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

**SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY-** Apart from works such as *Subahibi* or *Amygdalatropolis* or *No Tiger*, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. *Swords Under the Phosphor Sky* not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order



to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leona's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes



their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reality. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheromones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so



as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre. It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "-punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of Cyberpunk 2077, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary" aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that Cruelty Squad is a cyberpunk text,



in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like Killer7 - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcél's PSYCHOGRAMMA.

PSYCHOGRAMMA routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the "second nature" that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexplicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk's pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas borrowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less post-



modern “metaverse” - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir tends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded “dream-thoughts” through cyberspace, inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream exemplified in works like *Serial Experiments Lain* - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopo-





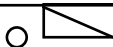
litical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Fox-tel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN!-NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Punpun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real world.



The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanted, but such that its otherworldly setting is a key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply aban-



done or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the “Heath cycle” - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of “wildness” as newly troubling freedom.

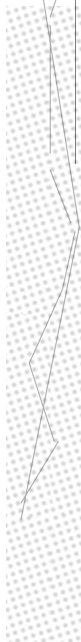
DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the “polyphony” Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the “languages” of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author’s imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispensable to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be under-

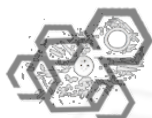


stood as intersubjectivity, and in which the “future” does not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of “small solutions”. Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanted life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.

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